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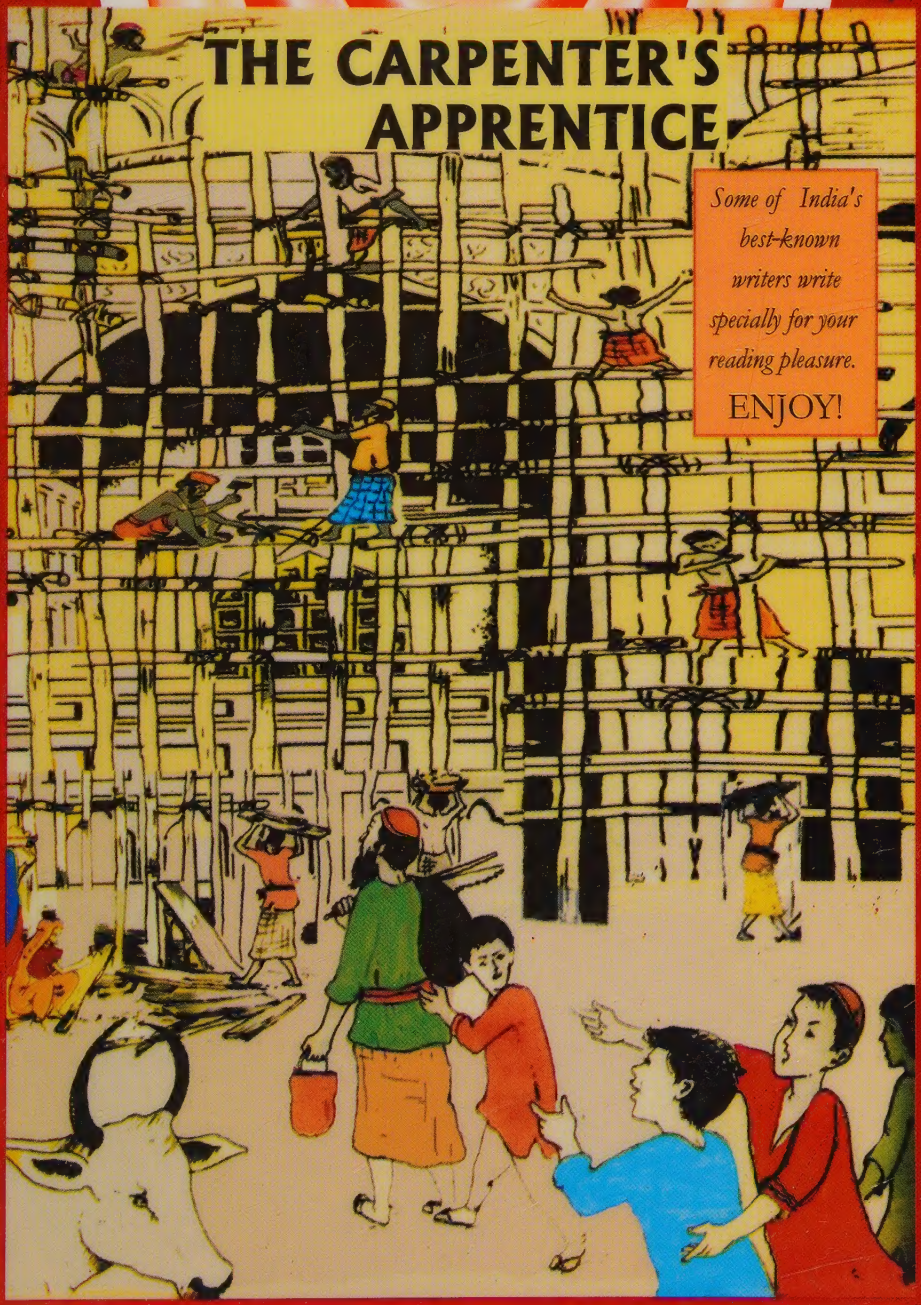

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CONTENTS

Faster Fenay lays a Ghost!
B R Bhagwat 5

Bhabloo!
Paro Anand 15

The Carpenter's Apprentice
Monisha Mukundan 21

Social Activism and all that Jazz ...
Sigrun Srivastava 29

My Sister's Sister
Sunil Gangopadhyay 37

Black Hole
Manu Mahadevan 49

Dark Storm and Bright Pearl
Mala Marwah 61

The Little World of Sadananda
Satyajit Ray 69

Who Wants Green Fingers Anyway?
Geeta Dharmarajan 85

The Journey
Swapna Dutta 93

The Tough Decision
Deepa Agarwal 105

The Young Writer!
Akshay Singh 119

Dear Mr Franks
Vandana J Bist 125

Faster Fenay lays a Ghost!

B R Bhagwat
Translated from Marathi by the author
Art by Tapas Guha

"What a gigantic tower!" exclaimed Banesh, alias Faster Fenay. "Is that a fortress?"

"Sort of," answered his friend Pravin Choubal. "It's the ancient residence of Inamdar Raval. A ruined palace where nobody lives now. The Inamdar himself has retired to Ahmedabad and his son Ketan is in service in Bombay. He's a friend of Sureshbhai."

"Shall we pay a visit to the tower? I love ruined palaces."

"You would!" laughed Pravin. "And if there weren't any, you'd love to ruin some!"

"Don't talk rubbish! Honestly, shall we go there tonight?"

"Impossible. The entrance to the tower is locked."

"Why?"

"Because it's a haunted tower. The whole of Amberkatha is under the shadow of a ghost. Every night, they say, a ghost walks on the wasteland, with ten foot strides!"

"It couldn't."

This story was first published in *Target* in April 1986.

"It does! The ghost is twenty feet tall."

"Nonsense! I don't believe in ghosts, tall or short."

Faster Fenay was on a holiday visit to Amberkatha, a small town in Gujarat, where his friend Pravin's elder brother Suresh was working as an engineer in an oil factory. The two had taken a long walk together and were now returning home.

On their way they came across a stream beside which was a small hut neatly roofed with Mangalore tiles. In the open space in front were stacks of hay and a pile of bamboos. "Neat place," remarked Faster Fenay. "No one's home, though."

"Come on," said Pravin, not listening. "I'm hungry."

Pravin led his friend home by a short route. As they approached the bungalow, they saw a bag and a holdall in the veranda.

"Guests?"

"Ketanbhai in person – the Inamdar's son I was telling you about just now," Pravin whispered.

A bespectacled young man was drinking tea and chatting with Suresh.

"Oh, hallo Pravin!" said Ketan, putting down his cup. "Kemchho – How are you?"

"Fine. Majaama choo," said Pravin. "This is my friend Banesh alias ..."

"Faster Fenay! Yes, I've heard of him. The spirit of adventure, eh? Will your spirit stand against a spirit from the other world, old chap?"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Faster Fenay.

"I mean I've come on two days' holiday with the sworn purpose of hunting a ghost which has been harassing this place for too long. The villagers wrote me a letter. So I came."

"You mean the ghost in the tower?"

"Right. So you've heard about it?"

"Pravin just told me," said Faster Fenay.

"And here's an old man who'll tell you a lot more," said Suresh, pointing to a wrinkled old man who was sitting in a corner of the room, smoking a clay pipe. It was such a dark corner that they had not noticed him at first. His eyes glowered at them out of the darkness.

"He's Shamaldas, the man who lives in the hut with Mangalore tiles," whispered Pravin to his friend. "Retired and alone."

"It's a very wicked ghost," the old man was saying through a cloud of smoke. "And my advice to you, youngsters, is not to disturb it."

"We won't," said Ketan, smiling. "We will lay the ghost, so that it will stop roaming and lie down in peace. Boys, if you're game for it, we'll go and sleep in the tower tonight!"

Faster Fenay stared at this wonderful new Dada, his eyes wide. What could be greater fun than hunting a ghost? He was game, of course, and Pravin too, after some hesitation.

"I wish I could come with you," said Suresh, "But I'm on night shift."

It was a moonless night. Gusts of wind whistled over the wasteland. The only other sound was the chirping of crickets. Stars shone in a moonless sky. Ketan led the way by flashing the torch which he held in one hand. In his other, he had a stout stick; and from his shoulder hung a cotton bag containing some snacks and odd things. Faster Fenay and Pravin made their way briskly behind him across the open fields, each with a bundle of bedding under his arm.

Soon they reached the high tower which was at one end of the castle wall. The wall itself was ruined with yawning gaps through which they easily clambered into the overgrown courtyard.

"Take care," said Ketan adjusting his torch, "There may be thorns, and even scorpions and snakes."

They safely made their way through the eerie light to the spot where the staircase should be. Ketan took out a bunch of keys and opened the creaking door. A couple of bats rushed out screeching, one striking Pravin's head.

"Damn!" he cried, after recovering from the shock. "For a moment I thought it was the ghost!"

The three began mounting the stairs through dust and darkness. At intervals there were slits in the wall through which starlight faintly shone.

"They're meant for rifles," whispered Pravin, and Faster Fenay nodded knowingly.

"How many steps are there?" asked Faster Fenay after a while.

"We've already climbed about a hundred!"

"It's not so high," said Ketan – "It's just that it's a spiral."

Then suddenly, *Ttock!* "We've come to the end!"

Ketan unbolted the door which now faced them. It opened easily. The room which they entered was a circular one with a low ceiling and four narrow windows through which twinkled an occasional star.

"There's so much dust here, we won't be able to sleep unless we sweep the floor first," said Ketan and added smilingly, "Not that we can all go to sleep. One of us has to keep a watch."

Pravin picked up a broom which was lying against the wall and swept the floor clean. Then they spread the durries they had brought with them and sat down. It was gloomy and still.

"What shall we do now? Shall we play chess?" asked Ketan. "I've brought the things."

"No," said Pravin. "We'll need the torch for that and we should save our light for an emergency."

"You're right," said Ketan. "Then we'll just lie down and count sheep."

He had brought a plastic bottle full of water which he placed near his bed. As he was switching off the torch, the light fell on his wrist.

"Is that a silver bracelet, Ketanbhai?" asked Faster Fenay.

"Yes. It's a present which Bapu brought for me from Dwaraka when he was on a pilgrimage. I wear it always because it's supposed to be lucky. But it's a bit irritating, so I take it off before going to sleep." He unclasped the trinket and put it on the window sill.

They lay down on their makeshift beds, but try as they might, they could not get a wink of sleep. So they chatted and told ghost stories just to keep up the atmosphere.

"It's fun listening to a ghost story, so long as you don't actually see a ghost, isn't it Pravin?" said Banesh. But Pravin didn't reply. He had just gone off to sleep.

"Soon you'll sleep too," and Ketan. "But don't worry. I'm here to keep guard."

But when Pravin awoke in the middle of the night, he found both his companions fast asleep. He looked at the window opposite. The moon must have risen an hour before, and

the window was bathed in light. He turned round and looked at the window at their head. He stiffened. A chalk white face was staring through the bars. Two eyes glistened like diamonds. The forehead and cheeks were lined with wrinkles. Hair stood erect and thorn-like on the head. The shoulders and the part of the chest he could see looked like a skeleton.

Pravin was so scared, he dived under his bedsheet. "The ghost!" he muttered to himself. He felt he was perspiring, and cold as ice at the same time. He wanted to cry out, but could not utter a word.

A moment later he gathered courage, saying to himself, "What will my friend say? Faster Fenay who has gone through so many adventures? And he doesn't believe in ghosts either... says there are no such things as ghosts. But then – What's that? All lines and ribs and arteries and veins ..."

With sudden courage he looked up again. The ghost had thrust the wrinkled palm of one hand through the bars of the window. It lifted the silver bracelet belonging to Ketan, then withdrew.

"Ketanbhai!" cried Pravin shaking him awake. "Wake up! Your ... er ... bracelet ... it's stolen ... stolen by the ghost ..."

Ketan got up with a start. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"There! Look there! In the window! Your bracelet's gone! Taken by the ghost!"

"Why should a ghost – My God! It does look queer!" Ketan caught glimpse of the hideous face.

"It doesn't look human!" he muttered.

"No human being could reach so high to steal it."

"No! And there was no ladder near the wall either!"

Faster Fenay, woken by the chatter, quickly scrambled to his friends' side.

"The ghost, Faster Fenay – the ghost!" whispered Pravin in his ear. "There goes the ghost with Ketandada's bracelet!"

"Why should a ghost need an earthly thing like a bracelet?" muttered Faster Fenay frowning; but then – *Ttock!*

Sweat glistened on his forehead, for he caught sight of the very tall figure moving away from the tower, ready to walk off across the deserted wasteland.

"What can it be? I never believed in ghosts. But this – this – is uncanny! A shining white figure – all ribs and arteries and bones and whatnot! No skin at all – this – this isn't human! Still, Ketanbhai, we must hurry and chase it. Come on!"

He picked up the torch and raced to the door. On the way he stumbled over the stick which Ketan had laid by his bed. He snatched it up too, and flashing the torch, started running down the spiral stairs.

Ketan, who was himself perspiring, felt ashamed that a smaller boy should be taking the lead. Shouting, "Come on!" to Pravin, he ran to the door.

But when they reached the open ground beyond the wall, the ghost and Faster Fenay were already some distance away. It wasn't easy to run over uneven ground in the moonlight. Pravin took a tumble, and Ketan lost valuable time hauling him up.

The tall white figure had very long legs and was making great strides across the land. But it wasn't walking straight. Faster Fenay felt that it wasn't making much progress, not

perhaps, too confident of itself. Was it stumbling! It certainly looked more awkward than a ghost had any right to. It reminded him of something but there was no time to think. Mini marathon runner that he was, Faster Fenay was quickly narrowing the distance between them. "Ghost or no ghost, this wretched thing must be stopped," he panted as he got within striking distance of the flapping white legs.

"Take that!" he cried and swung his stick and hit the fantastic leg with all the strength at his command – which wasn't much as you very well know!

The result, though, was amazing. The legs of the ghost collapsed under him and the whole twenty foot giant toppled to the ground.

As Ketan and Pravin reached the spot they found Faster Fenay bending over a pale face. Banesh turned to them and cried, "It's no ghost! It's old Shamaldas!"

"Mane maaf karjo! Forgive me!" Shamaldas was saying in his most appealing tone. A small oil lamp, emitting more smoke than light, lit the inside of his hut, where they'd carried him. "And please take this trinket of yours," he went on. "I only took it out of mischief, because it was lying in the window. I was going to give it to Ketanbhai tomorrow."

"Aren't you ashamed?"

"I do feel ashamed now. But I'm not a thief, I tell you!"

"Not a thief? What are you then? A ghost?"

"Sort of, sir! A man in ghost's makeup. I'm by nature a playful chap – a merry old mischief monger.

"Two years back I retired from a circus. I had no family ties. But I had a small ancestral piece of land in Amberkatha.

So I came here and built this house and started a bit of farming on my own. But how slowly the time passed. No excitement. No laughing crowds. I was bored. Then I saw the scarecrow in a neighbouring farm and thought to myself – why couldn't I go on with my circus work? Not for money, but for my own amusement."

"What exactly did you do in the circus, Shamalkaka?"

"I was a stiltwalker. A giant! It needs great skill and practice to walk on bamboos, you know. I thought I could be a private stiltwalker in Amberkatha."

"How did you do it, without anyone knowing?" asked Banesh.

"I worked at night. I chose a couple of strong stout bamboos fifteen feet long and fixed wooden supports about two and a half feet from the top. The rest was in me – the experience and the skill – and my old luminous circus clothes! When night came on, I did my stiltwalking over the wasteland. My spirits rose with my artificial height. I felt like a king! From then on, I used to roam the wasteland."

"So that's how the legend of the ghost came about," exclaimed Pravin.

"You looked like a real ghost, Shamalkaka, if ever there was one!" said Banesh. "What a fantastic idea!"

"But you must admit it was wrong of him to play with the emotions of the ignorant people of Amberkatha," put in Ketan. "A timid person could have died of fright."

"I'm really sorry about it all now," said Shamaldas, as with trembling hands he lighted his clay pipe. There was a pause. "Of course, if any of you'd like to learn stiltwalking ..."

Pravin and Faster Fenay exchanged grins.

Bhabloo!

Paro Anand

Art by Rustam Vania

Bhabloo was a Himalayan Bear cub who lived up in the high mountains a long, long time ago. The icy cold winds did not bother Bhabloo as he had such a thick, black glossy coat with not a speck of white on it. His mother was as proud of him as she was worried, for Bhabloo could never keep still for long. He was always in search of adventure. His mother would growl him umpteen warnings that one day he would land himself in trouble, but of course, he never listened to her!

One full moon night, Bhabloo lay next to his mother at the mouth of their den. She was fast asleep for they had a good day in a maize field. Bhuttas were Bhabloo's favourite food! But now, he grew restless. He felt as though he had slept forever. He felt as though the next day would never begin.

"Oh, why can't something exciting happen for a change?" Bhabloo said to himself. "Something really exciting! Why can't I do something that would make all the bears think, Wow! Look, there's Bhabloo, the greatest Bear in the Mountains. Like, why can't I go to the moon? Oh,

This story was first published in *Target* in December 1989.

wouldn't that be something! Bhabloo, the First Bear on the Moon!"

His bright black eyes fixed firmly on the perfect "O" of the moon, suddenly Bhabloo stiffened. What was that? Yes, yes, it was quite clear. He could go to the moon! He WOULD go to the moon! He would go to the moon right now! His whole body trembled with excitement as he took another look.

Yes – there was no doubt about it at all. A tall deodar – as tall as the sky itself, swayed in the breeze and every time it swayed to the right, it touched the moon. Yes, it definitely touched the moon! And then, it swayed away again. It was so simple. So simple that he was amazed that no one had ever thought of it before. All he had to do was to climb up the tree and then, when it swayed in the right direction, jump quickly onto the moon! How simple, how excitingly simple!

Stealthily Bhabloo stood up and on soft paws he padded out, leaving his sleeping mother blissfully unaware of his intentions.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Bhabloo broke into a rolling gallop. The crisp night air cooled his wet black nose as he breathed in the tangy scent of pine. He arrived beneath his tree, and without stopping to catch his breath, he started to climb. Bhabloo was an excellent climber. He could manage these tall upright deodars better than most other bears.

Once he reached the branches, he rested a little, gazing down at the sleeping forest. He smiled, thinking that if this didn't wake everybody up, nothing would. The First Bear on the Moon! Ha! The thought spurred him and he began

his climb again – higher and higher! A startled owl hooted in the branches, nearly making Bhabloo lose his foothold. But determined as he was, he caught himself, regained his balance and carried on, higher and higher, up and up. The branches were thinning out now, but Bhabloo hardly noticed it. His excitement mounted and his body shivered. He was almost near the top now, another branch or two, and then the final jump onto the ... OH!

OH! OH! Bhabloo looked up, expecting to meet the moon face-to-face. Oh! Oh! The moon was nowhere near the tree. It was very, very far. As far away as it had been when he was on the ground. *Tch! Tch!*

Bhabloo felt small and foolish. His body trembled and shook with shame. But suddenly he realized that it wasn't only shame which made him tremble, but also the shaking of the thin branch on which he stood. It groaned under his weight and bent dangerously. Quickly Bhabloo tried to back off, but it was too late. With a final crack, the branch gave way

Head over heels, tumbling, fumbling, falling, down and down, and further down. Hitting branches and scratching himself.

AH-AHHAA-AAAAAAAHHAAAA!

T-H-U-M-P! And black blackness all around ...

The she-bear awoke with a start. Was she dreaming or had she heard ... yes, Bhabloo was missing. Oh, what had that cub of hers got up to now? "Bhabloo? Bhabloo?" she grunted as she set off into the forest. "Bhabloo? Bha-bloo!" She came upon him there. Lying so still and lifeless beneath a tree. Flat out on his stomach with all his four

legs splayed out, his eyes shut tight.

"Bhabloo?" she whimpered and nuzzled him with her wet nose. "Bhabloo my son, wake up, please wake up." But the cub didn't stir.

Gathering all her strength, the she-bear pushed her muzzle under her cub's belly and with a mighty heave, rolled him over. A gasp escaped her as she saw the nasty gash which had ripped his chest open. "Oh Bhabloo, what have you done, my child, what have you done?" The she-bear let out a long wail as tears glittered in her eyes. She looked away from her cub and up at the bright clear sky.

She was amazed, transfixed by what she saw.

The moon seemed to grow brighter. Then a face appeared on it and smiled and then, she felt a cool sensation in her paw. Looking down, she was astonished to see a silvery moonbeam dancing on her paw. The she-bear looked up again. The Moon Face smiled once more and then disappeared.

In a flash, the she-bear knew just what she had to do. She grasped the dancing moonbeam in one paw, and picked up a pine needle in the other. She then threaded the moonbeam through the needle and swiftly went to work – stitching up the tear in Bhabloo's chest.

And soon, it was done! There shone on Bhabloo's chest a bright, white "V." He opened his eyes. "Mama!" he whispered.

The bears came from every corner of the mountains to look at Bhabloo and the beautiful white "V" on his chest. They all felt so dull in their plain black coats. And they all appealed to the moon to give them a moonbeam to sew onto their chests!

Well, what could the moon do! She sent so many moonbeams for so many bears that almost without anyone noticing, she had become so thin, almost disappeared. Really, just an eyelash in the sky.

But Bhabloo and his mother noticed. They warned the bears to stop taking moonbeams before the moon disappeared altogether. The bears who were left without their white "Vs" were most put out. But the moon promised that when she had regained her full strength she would give her moonbeams again.

And, from that day onwards, the moon, when she is full, sends her moonbeams to all Himalayan Bears, until she has waned almost completely. Then they have to wait till she is full again.

And that is why the handsome Himalayan Black Bear wears a beautiful white "V" on its sleek black coat.

So you see, Bhabloo did become famous after all. And to this day, little bear cubs are told stories of Bhabloo the Moonbeam Bear!

The Carpenter's Apprentice

Monisha Mukundan

Art by Jagadish Aich Roy

Mohammad sat up with a jerk. Today! Today was the day that Ustad Pira, his master, had promised that he'd be allowed to help with the main scaffolding. Mohammad glanced at the sleeping figures of his family in the shadowy darkness of the room and then, slipping impatiently out of his bed into the chill of a winter dawn, he pushed aside the reed and cotton curtain that hung across the doorway and stepped out into the great open courtyard. Here, the dawn silence was broken by the sounds of animals shifting in their stalls; camels who had carried the red sandstone from Rajasthan, donkeys and horses who drew carts bringing marble from the mines at Makrana. Already, shrouded figures were moving through the clutter of the serai and in the quarter of the marble inlayers, he could see the glow of one or two fires. Women were already awake, and busy preparing the midday meal that their husbands and children would carry to the site.

Mohammad hurried along the red sandstone cloister which, enclosed by screens and ragged curtains, served as

This story was first published in *Target* in August 1987.

home to the carpenters' families who had lived in Mumtazabad for over ten years, lending their skills to the building of the Empress' tomb. Mohammad had been only two years old when his family had come to live here and he knew of no other home, no other way of life. His days were filled with the sound of hammering and sawing, as masons chipped away at the blocks of stone that arrived so regularly, and as sculptors carved floral motifs on the individually dressed stone slabs, and inlayers bent over their intricate work. He worked with the carpenters, doing odd jobs and running errands for the men who hammered away at the enormous scaffolding that enclosed the brick and stone skeleton that dominated the lives of the thousands of men, women and children who lived in Mumtazabad.

"It is to be the greatest, the most extraordinary building ever created by human hands, by the grace of God," Mohan Lal, one of the chief inlayers, was fond of telling his apprentices. "The setting of each stone in every flower must be perfect. Each petal and each leaf must be as perfect as Taz Bibi, in whose memory we are working." Mohammad had heard that the Emperor had vowed to make the most beautiful building in the world so that people would never forget his beloved wife, who had died so young.

Mohammad squatted down outside Ustad Pira's home, waiting for him to get up. Ustad Pira was the master carpenter, the best carpenter, so it was said, in the whole empire. He had travelled from Delhi to Agra to work on the building, and his workmanship had helped to lay the foundations for the enormous structure which was to rise beside the Jamuna River.

As dawn lifted the edges of darkness from the serai, Mohammad heard the muezzin's call to prayer. "Allah-o-Akbar" came the ancient chant, rising faintly into the sky. Obediently, Mohammad spread his head covering on the floor and bent his head in prayer. "Allah-o-Akbar" came the cry again. Inside the screened pavilion, Mohammad heard Ustad Pira stirring and then rising quickly, and hurrying to make his first prayers of the day.

Soon, the mat that curtained the doorway would be swept aside, and Ustad Pira would emerge, carrying his bag of tools, "my hands and feet" he called them, allowing no one to carry his bag or use his tools. Mohammad would take the lunch vessel from his wife, feeling the warmth of it through the cloth in which it was tied, and hurry after his master, joining the multitudes of workmen who strode to the site as the sun rose redly above them.

Mohammad knew that his father too was a very good carpenter, a careful, skilled worker, but Ustad Pira was more than that. He was an artist, a master of his craft, an inspired craftsman who could solve problems, devise new ways to use carpentry to create a building the like of which had never been created before. And, when he was called upon to bring his skill and strength to the service of the emperor, he brought an extraordinary ability and artistry to the task. For this was no ordinary building and it required no ordinary wooden and bamboo scaffolding as other monuments did. The scaffolding for this structure had to be strong, very strong, strong enough to bear the weight of the many workmen who swarmed up and down, fitting each slab of worked and dressed marble perfectly into place, putting the finishing touches to

the carvings and the inlay work upon it.

And Mohammad, knowing all this, was proud to be Ustad Pira's apprentice. The master craftsman was very particular and chose his apprentices with care. Mohammad understood how fortunate he was to be allowed to work with the master, the ustad.

Suddenly a wiry figure hurled itself at Mohammad. "Dreaming again!" cried a familiar voice. "Don't you know it's morning?" Mohammad fell against the cold paved floor, then sprang to his feet to take on Hassan, who'd moved back and was slapping his thighs like the wrestlers they'd seen at the Id bazaar. Suddenly Hassan dropped his pose and smiled, his thin face transformed, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "No, no, Mohammad bhai, I don't really want to fight you. You're much bigger than I am," he added, making a comical face. "Listen, bhai, I hear there's to be an elephant fight outside the fort today. Ali, the camel cart driver, said he was going that way to deliver some fruit to the palace, and will give us a ride there if we wait near the river for him. Ask your ustad for a little time off. We'll go together. Hafiz and Shaukat are going too. We'll really enjoy ourselves there."

"I wish I could," Mohammad said. "But today ... today's the day that Ustad Pira said he will allow me to work on the scaffolding itself. He said he'd let me help him to make a join, show me how two big sections of wood fit together for strength. I wish I could come with you, but you can see that I can't."

Hassan's smile died but he nodded understandingly. He, too, was an apprentice and he knew what Mohammad meant. Just then, Hafiz and Shaukat came strolling through

the serai. "Ready?" said Hafiz. "We'd better hurry if we want to go in Ali's cart."

"Mohammad can't come," Hassan said, and explained why.

"Oh?" Hafiz, the oldest of the boys, turned to Mohammad. He was apprenticed to one of the inlayers and his master's skill and handling of the gems made Hafiz feel that he, too, was a specially fortunate being. Nobody disturbed Hafiz when he was working, and when his master gave him time off, Hafiz expected his friends to be able to take some time off too.

Mohammad tried to smile. "Today is an important day," he started to explain. "The join ..."

But Hafiz's face was already filled with derision. "Important!" he said mockingly. "The wooden step ladder is important, the foolish one says! When all the wood and all your carefully made joins have long been dismantled and gone, and we've rotted in our graves, my brother, the marble flowers we make will draw gasps of admiration from all who come to visit Taz Bibi's grave. Important? If my master can spare me from his immortal work, surely your master can spare you from work that will soon be gone and forgotten? Important!" he snorted. The others tittered.

Mohammad hung his head. Hafiz was older and the unkind gleam in his eyes was more than he could bear. Was it true that carpentry played so little part in the work? Had his father and Ustad sahib given their skill and the best years of their lives for nothing? Did it all matter so little? Would no one remember, no one care?

While the boys had been talking, the entire settlement

had been coming alive. Voices called to each other, children shouted, babies howled and the rattle of carts and the clatter of pans threatened to drown out all human sounds.

"Come, Mohammad," said Hassan in a kinder voice. "Why don't you ask him? Maybe he'll let you come with us. There isn't an elephant fight every day."

Miserably, Mohammad shook his head. Was it true, what they said? Was his ustad's work of no account? Was the inlayers' work immortal, and their own of so little use?

Suddenly, he heard the rattle of the reed curtain being drawn aside, and the clank of his master's tool bag behind him. He sprang to his feet, raising his hand to his forehead in greeting. Ustad Pira nodded, handing him the lunch bundle without a glance at the boys who hovered uncertainly in front of him. He set off at his usual pace towards the skeleton of the building that towered on the horizon. Mohammad followed in silence, trying to sort out the confused thoughts that raced through his head.

They had reached the site before Ustad Pira spoke. He didn't mention Hafiz or the elephant fight, but he looked closely at Mohammad and said, "Every bit of work is important. If we didn't build the scaffolding, in the best way we can, there would be no building, no base for the marble and the decorations. We helped to lay the foundations of the building, and the building rises only because we are here, making platforms on which men can work. Each one of us contributes to the emperor's work, each one is necessary to the building's growth. And when it's done, no one will ask which guild was responsible for this panel or that tower or this floor. They'll only know that

Taz Bibi's Mahal, the tomb of Begum Mumtaz Mahal is the most perfect building in all creation. And our hands have helped to create it."

Mohammad looked up at Ustad Pira's lined face and strong hands, and at the way the sun shone on his hair. All at once he was filled with joy and strength and love. He knew that Hafiz would never be able to intimidate him again. As the other carpenters drew close, he stood up with an adze in his hand. "I'm ready," he said to his master and moved with him towards the towering wooden structure.

Social Activism and all that Jazz...

Sigrun Srivastava

Drawing by Tapas Guha

It was Priyanka's fault, that stupid sister of mine – the social activist. She had poisoned my mind with her lectures on social awareness – equal rights for the poor, India's socio-ecological problems. She made my life miserable! Every time I was about to eat my first mouth-watering bite of a hot, buttered roti, she reminded me of the starving millions in the country and in the whole wide world. Every time I stood under the shower she banged at the door and shouted, "Don't waste water. There is a drought in Rajasthan. People get water only once in eight days." It got so bad, I hesitated even to flush the toilet. Her words rang in my ears: "Twelve litres of water down the drain." My throat tightened as I watched the waiter of the Golden Dragon Chinese Restaurant place before me a shining silver cup filled with litchis and ice cream, my favourite sweet dish. They no longer tasted as sweet as before.

That's why I didn't want to go to Ashok Mehta's birthday party. I hated his parties. There were too many girls floating around, all colours, all shapes, all sizes, overweight and underweight. They were all stupid, sitting

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there in their frilly frocks, bedecked with laces, ribbons and bows, sipping delicately at a glass of coke.

The boys hung around in groups, their eyes wandering around the room, tapping their feet to the sound of U-2.

Even the sight of the table groaning under the weight of the goodies piled on it did not lift my spirits. The picture of potbellied children with a tin in their hands, queueing up for a ladleful of rice flashed through my mind. "It's not fair!" I thought. "Life and all that goes with it." My sister, my parents leaving me with so many questions and no answers.

A hand fell on my shoulder. "Hi, Raj," Manoj grinned at me. "What's eating you, man? You look sour! Just look at all the fancy stuff!" He took in the room in a circular movement of his arm. "Fab!" he said and winked at me.

I wasn't sure what he referred to, the goodies on the table or the girls in all their starched and ironed glory. I wanted to talk to him. But couldn't. There was a time I could discuss everything with him. But lately I'd seen very little of him. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah." His eyes roamed over the congregation of guests, waving to a person here and helloing to another one there. With a "See you later" he breezed off, greeting a girl in oversized, colourful shirt and pants.

I left the drawing room and wandered to the veranda, bathed in the cool rays of the setting November sun. At the far end, in a Hollywood swing, sat a girl in a simple white dress, her delicate face aglow with pleasant excitement, surrounded by a group of girls and boys. She sat like the Queen of Sheba holding court. And what beat it all was the pair of massive dark glasses covering half her face. A snob, a real snob!

I was about to leave, when the lively conversation

around Her Majesty drew me closer. "Kashmir ...," she spoke in faraway voice. "You must go to Kashmir in autumn, when the leaves change colour and rustle under your feet. Walking through the woods is an unforgettable experience. And going up to Chandanwari on horseback," she laughed softly, "Being carried up the last stretch on a palanquin. You should have seen my grandmother! She weighs a ton. She was so frightened she didn't speak a word. And that's very unusual for my grandmother." The ladies-in-waiting at her feet giggled and all the court jesters laughed.

"Ha, ha, ha," I thought. "How funny. What about the poor chaps slogging up the hill, with a human load of a few tons cutting into their shoulders?" What about them, I wanted to ask. Another ripple of laughter broke through her words.

"Did you really, Anisha?" a sycophant asked.

"Yes, I did," her voice rang proudly. "I caught it! And hung on to it, crying to my father to get it off the hook. It was the biggest trout we caught that day. Oh, fishing is so much fun and the taste of those trout! Fantastic! You can't get them there in Delhi!"

I couldn't stand it any longer. "Yes," I said, addressing all of them, particularly the girl sitting enthroned amongst them. "Yes," I said with a throat all knotted up. Everything I had recently wanted to talk about, in a more rational, detached manner with organized thoughts like my sister's – well, it just came out. The words just tumbled from my lips. "Yes, life is fine. Great fun if you go through it riding on palanquins, but what about those who have to carry them, almost breaking under the load, doing anything in their struggle for sheer survival, fighting floods, droughts,

diseases, fighting for their cattle, their land, their homes? What about them? D'you think about them when you eat your fried trout? Do you?"

"Raj!"

"Let me be!"

Manoj shook my by the shoulder. "Stop it, you ass," he hissed and pulled me away. "Why do you have to make a fool of yourself? Can't you see the girl is blind! Why do you think she's wearing those black glasses? For conjunctivitis?"

"Blind?" I asked. "Blind?" The ground was giving way under my feet. I was falling – falling – feeling miserable, and sick.

"Hey," Manoj consoled me, "Don't take it so badly. We all make mistakes. Come and apologize to her. She's a good sport. She'll understand." But I could not apologize to her, not there, not then. I just couldn't. I left without saying a word to anyone.

It was all my sister's fault. Why did she have to rub it in all the time, accusing me of indifference towards India's prevailing social problems, and then pushing off to help in a relief camp in Rajasthan? But I went to see the blind girl a few days later. "Take some flowers," Ashok suggested when I asked him the address.

"Flowers?" I asked. "For a blind girl?"

"Why not?" Ashok said. "Especially for a blind girl!"

I felt silly standing on her doorstep with flowers in my hands. "Oh, she'll love these," her mother smiled, and showed me up to Anisha's room.

She looked up when I entered, her hand resting on thick off-white pages bearing dotted braille impressions. She'd

been reading. "Yes, please?" she asked, cocking her head.

"I ... I ...," I stuttered, moving closer, "I'm Raj. I've come ... I want ..."

"Raj," she murmured. "Ah, yes, we met at Ashok's party."

"We didn't meet," I replied uncomfortably, "Not really ..."

"Yes, we did," she insisted. "You gave me hell for talking about being carried up the mountains in a palanquin."

"Please don't!" I felt myself blush with embarrassment. "I'm sorry, really sorry. I never realized ...," I swallowed.

"But you had a point," she nodded. "I understood you very well. Pity, you were off that fast."

I searched her face for signs of sarcasm, irony. When I found none I relaxed. I watched her get up and walk over to the door. "Have a cold drink." She smiled, then pressed a bell. Returning to her seat she invited me to sit down on the chair opposite her.

"You see," she continued seriously, "I often ask myself, what can we as individuals do for the millions that need help."

"Nothing," I said defeatedly. "Nothing."

"But we can, we can. I've decided to start collecting rice and dal for the homeless people in Swami Nagar. I'll start in our colony, I ..."

"You!" I asked. "You?"

Though I didn't say it, she understood.

"I might be blind," she replied casually, as casually as Manoj would say, I might be dumb but I can do it, why not! "I might be blind," Anisha said, "But I can walk and talk. I'm going to do it. It isn't much, I know, but it is a beginning. Some of my friends might join me."

"I will," I said spontaneously, "I will!"

Suddenly I felt funny in the pit of my stomach. Ticklish sort of. I knew I could talk to her – about everything. Everything! She'd understand. I was glad I had brought the flowers. They came in handy. They sort of sealed the pact between us, if you know what I mean.

My Sister's Sister

Sunil Gangopadhyay
Translated from Bangla by Swapna Dutta
Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

I had gone to Howrah Station to receive my elder sister who was coming from Delhi.

My sister is a very courageous girl and does not mind travelling all alone to any part of the world. Once she had to go to Madras for an interview. My mother had asked my elder brother to go with her. But my sister put her foot down firmly saying, "There's absolutely no need. I'm not a kid and don't need anyone to hold my hand!"

Mother, horrified at her words, had exclaimed, "Good gracious, who on earth has ever heard of a girl going on such a long journey unescorted!" My sister merely shrugged and said, "Aren't you aware that girls from Bengal have been going on solo flights? Folks are no longer as cowardly as they used to be when you were young!"

My sister had tremendous determination. Eventually she did manage to go off all alone. The very next day we heard on the wireless that the Madras Mail was involved in an accident. Naturally, the entire household was in tears. Mother stopped eating while my father and brother dashed about here, there and everywhere in quest of news. My

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brother left for Madras by air the very same evening. The next day my sister's wire arrived from Madras: "The interview went off all right. No need to worry!"

The accident had taken place just seven miles away from Madras. The engine was damaged and the first few bogies had been derailed and battered out of shape. Luckily my sister's bogey had not been affected too much. She had maintained her cool and got down from the train. Then she had walked up to a local shop, borrowed a bicycle (on hire of course!) and cycled down to the place of interview! Everyone had admired her remarkable presence of mind.

But in spite of getting the job, my sister did not stick to it for long. She hates being cooped up in the same city for too long! So now she had a job in Delhi and was coming to Calcutta on a visit after four long months.

The train was an hour late! I walked about the platform aimlessly until my feet ached. There was just no place to sit. People had occupied all the seats on the platform and some were even sleeping on them! At last the train chugged into the station. There was the usual rush and bustle everywhere! I went and stood before the ladies' compartment. There were just two passengers there – my sister and an old lady. It seemed totally incredible that a train coming from Delhi could possibly have such an empty compartment! The two of them must have had a real cozy journey, sleeping all the way!

My sister held the old lady's hand and helped her alight from the train. I took charge of my sister's suitcase and bedding. My sister called me and said, "Here, Nilu! Come and touch her feet. She's my elder sister, you know.

My Baro didi!" I was quite astonished. I had just one sister myself! But if this woman was my sister's sister, she was bound to be mine as well! But I'd never in my life heard of any other sister!

The old lady had a roses and cream complexion, snow white hair and a winsome smile. She must belong to some famous family, I thought, for two men in khaki uniform had come to receive her and see to her luggage. She had a lovely cane basket in her hand which she did not hand over to anybody. I felt sure that it must contain her jewellery.

I bent down and touched her feet just as my sister had asked me to. She laid a hand on my head and blessed me aloud, saying – "Live long and be brave!"

Then she turned to my sister and said, "Why don't both of you come with me? I've my car here."

I said, "But our father's office car is also here."

"Well then, so long!" she said. Then she said to my sister, "I hope you'll remember all I've been telling you?"

My sister replied, "Oh yes, Baro didi. I'll remember everything and I'll definitely see you when you come to Delhi again."

The moment we got into our car I asked my sister who the old lady was. She merely said, "My elder sister."

The very next moment she asked me, "By the way, Nilu, have you any idea where one can buy cobras?"

I was startled! Had I heard her right? "What did you say?" I asked again. "Buy what?"

"Cobras!" said my sister simply, as if it was the most normal request in the world.

"What on earth do you want cobras for?"

"I want to buy one. Buy it and tame it!"

"What! Tame a real, live snake?"

My sister burst out laughing and said, "Why not? They are pretty useful creatures!"

I was absolutely certain my sister had gone batty! Or perhaps there was something wrong with my ears! I put my fingers in both my ears and shook my head vigorously.

At home mother asked my sister, "I hope you had a nice journey? Did you get any food on the way?"

My sister replied, "Yes mother, there was no problem. Our compartment was jampacked until Mughalsarai, but after that it was absolutely empty!"

"You don't mean to tell me that everyone got down at Mughalsarai?" asked my mother incredulously.

My sister smiled and said, "Well, they did! There were dacoits in our compartment, you see!"

Mother screamed! "What! What did you say? Dacoits in your compartment! How utterly dreadful ... and dangerous! What on earth did you do?"

My sister said, "Well, I had nothing to fear. I had Baro didi with me."

"Who on earth is Baro didi? Surely, she didn't tackle the dacoits single-handed?"

"She did, and drove them all away!"

Well, I had seen my sister's Baro didi. She was at least seventy, if not more! It was totally impossible for a feeble woman like her to drive away dacoits! I couldn't stand it any longer and blurted out, "Mother, she has been talking a lot of rubbish ever since she arrived! Absolute nonsense!"

My sister burst out laughing at my words and said, "Oh well, I'll explain it all in a little while, but you'd better

give me something to eat first. I'm famished! I'll just go and wash my hands."

Everyone surrounded my sister at the dining table. Including her two next door friends, Khuku didi and Mini didi. My sister-in-law, unable to bear the suspense any longer, said, "Come on, Chotan! Out with it! Were there really dacoits?"

My sister sipped her tea leisurely and said, "Well, one had a pistol and the other had a dagger. The one with the dagger had a bushy beard." Everyone squealed in anticipation.

Mother cried, "And what did the wretched dacoits do? Really, I can't imagine why the government doesn't do something about them! How do they expect people to travel by train under such conditions!"

My sister said, "I'll never be afraid of dacoits again!"

Khuku didi, her friend, said in an exasperated voice, "Really Chotan! I can't imagine why you should go on and on beating about the bush! Who on earth is this Baro didi of yours? Tell us that first!"

My sister said, "Well, she isn't an ordinary person. She is an aunt of the King of Assam and so very beautiful, in spite of her age! And she knows ever so many languages! Bangla, English, Hindi, French and what-have-you! Goes about globe trotting on her own and has visited so many foreign countries, I tell you, she isn't afraid of anything! Nothing at all!"

"Did you know her before, then?" Mother asked.

My sister said, "No. I met her on the train. It was sheer good luck that I was sitting next to her. She hardly

spoke to me at first. Just kept looking at me every now and then. Then she suddenly asked me, Do you sleep during the day?

"I said, Why do you ask? She said, I can't stand people who sleep during the day, especially during a train journey!

"I laughed and said, I don't sleep during the daytime.

"This pleased her immensely and she spoke to me very pleasantly after that. She told me ever so many interesting yarns! She's a great storyteller! I hardly realized how rapidly the hours flew, I got so engrossed in them!"

Minu didi said, "What were the stories like? Do tell us some!"

But my sister-in-law stopped her and said, "No, no, come to the point. Tell us about the dacoits before anything else. When did they get in? And how?"

My sister said, "Okay. I'll tell you about her yarns some other day. Let me tell you about the dacoits first ...

"There were about eight or ten women in the ladies' compartment, the rest were all men."

My sister-in-law exclaimed, "Good heavens! You don't mean to tell me that menfolk also travel by the ladies' compartment?"

"Of course they do," said my sister. "I suppose you haven't travelled by train for ages, that's why you know nothing about the things that happen these days! No one cares a hang about rules and such things! I remember telling a ticket checker once, There's a regular mob in this compartment! Can't you make them move elsewhere? The TC merely shrugged and said, No, I can't – although I know for certain that many

of them are travelling without tickets!

"Well, then, Baro didi said, Let them remain during the day if they want to. I'll make them get down once its dark!

"I was quite astounded at her words and said, But Baro didi, are they going to listen to you?

"Baro didi said, Of course, they'll listen – if I tell them properly. A lot of men are given to snoring. I can't sleep at all when there's a snorer around. That's why I don't travel by general compartments and always go in for a ladies' compartment!

"Well, it soon grew dark. Baro didi got up from her place and said in a real commanding tone – Look here, boys, you'd better get down now and find a place somewhere else. I've allowed you to remain here long enough! She spoke as if the entire train were her personal property and it was she who decided who should sit where! But strangely enough, most of the menfolk left our compartment quite meekly, without any argument whatsoever! Two of them were Bengali boys and I quite expected them to argue about her sudden order but they didn't and got down silently. Only three men remained. They sounded extremely apologetic as they told Baro didi, Please let us stay a little longer. We have to get down after two more stations and there isn't an inch of room anywhere else in the train! Baro didi said, Are you quite sure? They said, Of course, we are!

"We passed the next station. Baro didi spread out her own bedding, keeping her pretty little woven-cane jewellery box beside her pillow. Then she told me, Please keep an eye on my things while I go and wash my hands.

"We passed the second station before Baro didi was back from the toilet. She returned and sat down in her place. Then she said in a stern voice, Hey you! What do you mean by remaining here? Why didn't you get down? The three men stood up!"

My sister-in-law exclaimed, "Were they the dacoits then?"

Khuku didi said, "Boudi, please don't interrupt. Let Chotan tell her story."

My sister said, "Yes, indeed they were the dacoits! They stood up and said, We don't get down at stations. We're used to jumping down from moving trains. But before we do that, hand over whatever valuables you have, all of you!

"The three dacoits pointed their pistols and daggers at us. All the girls started crying and screaming hysterically. My own heart was thudding like nobody's business! Then I glanced at Baro didi. She merely looked at the three men angrily. Baro didi turned to me and said, Sit still. There's nothing to be afraid of! Then she whispered something in my ears.

"The other girls handed over all their jewellery and cash. One of the ladies refused to give her necklace. The bearded dacoit just tore it off her neck. Then they came towards us. The one who was obviously the chief, said to Baro didi – Look here, Grandma, better hand over all you have.

"Baro didi said, I'm not your grandma!

"The dacoit said, Oh well, grannie, then! Grandma or grannie, whatever you like to be called, let me have all your jewellery and fast!

"Baro didi turned to me and said in a disgusted voice, How boorish and ill-mannered the present day dacoits are! Fancy pointing a dagger at a lady! Now, in the olden days even the dacoits used to be cultured and soft-spoken! We've had dacoits breaking into our house so often but no one even tried to scare off women! I remember how once Raghu dacoit's son Madhu had broken into our house. What a nice boy he was! He stood before me with folded hands saying, Mother dear ...

"The three dacoits interrupted her and said, For goodness' sake, cut it out! We've no time to listen to your yarns! Show us where your things are!

"Baro didi said, Oh well, if you're in such a hurry! Wait! Don't you dare touch any of us! All my jewellery is in this cane basket. I'll give it to you just now.

"Baro didi opened her basket. The three dacoits bent over it eagerly. But the moment she took off the lid, a huge cobra lifted its head and hissed ferociously!"

"I suppose it was a toy snake, made of a spring?" we all said together.

My sister said, "Of course not! You only see toy snakes in films! This was a real big, live cobra with an enormous head! The three dacoits screamed and took a few steps backwards. The cobra looked at them and swayed its hood dangerously.

"Baro didi opened her handbag and took out a small flute. The moment she blew into it, the snake slithered out of the basket and made a beeline for the dacoits.

"The dacoits were so stunned that for a moment they could not decide what to do. Before the leader could speak, the snake entwined itself round one of his legs and

held its hood right over him, ready to strike any moment! Baro didi said, If I blow into the whistle once more, the snake is going to bite. Shall I?

"The dacoits, thoroughly unnerved by this unexpected turn of events, burst into a volley of howls, crying, Save us! Take pity on us!

"Baro didi said, But I feel a real strong urge to blow into the flute ... really play it ... what shall I do about that?

"The three dacoits threw down all money and the jewellery which they had taken, on the floor and said, We'll rub our noses on the floor of the compartment, if you like!

"Baro didi then spoke to the snake in a caressing voice and said, Cobra darling, leave the wretched man and come to me, will you? The cobra really listened to her words. It let go of the man's legs and stood coiled up in a corner. Baro didi said, I also have a viper here – I haven't taken it out as yet! That one has a bit of temper, you see! With the entire country packed with folks like you ... well, I always make it a point to carry my tamed snakes with me.

"Baro didi really made the three of them rub their noses on the floor and as soon as the train slowed down, they jumped from the running train and took to their heels real fast!

"But funnily enough, all the other ladies also dashed out of the compartment at the very next station. They thanked Baro didi for saving their money and their jewellery but refused point blank to travel with two live snakes. So, of course, the two of us slept comfortably all night. Baro didi told me all about the techniques of taming

snakes. A really tame snake is even more obedient than a pet dog!"

When my sister's story was told everyone said that they too would go and visit my sister's Baro didi. But I asked her, "Tell me, Didi, weren't you REALLY afraid of the snakes? Not even a wee bit?"

She said, "Why on earth should I be afraid? Baro didi had already whispered to me that their poison fangs were removed! Do you think she'd have trusted them otherwise, pet or no pet?!"

Black Hole

Manu Mahadevan
Illustrated by Subba Ghosh

The village of Luniyas where Chandu stayed was just a mile away from the river bed where he had brought his flock of sheep to graze. It was his daily routine to bring his father's sheep to graze by the river bed which at this time of the year was practically dry.

Chandu would sit and muse for hours about the villagers, the local priest, the old woman whom his mother called a witch, and his favourite dog Tommy – since for him all dogs were Tommys and all Tommys dogs! At times he would relish the memories of his elder brother's marriage and all the laddus that he had eaten on that day. Why couldn't all days be wedding days, he wondered. He would think of his own marriage. Yes, he would get married too. He would get more laddus made than anyone in the village had ever seen. But hadn't he heard his father tell his brother that they hardly had any money left for Chandu's marriage? Chandu shrugged away his depression by deciding that when the time came he had to be firm and make his views clear. Either they would have to have more laddus or else he wouldn't marry.

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Today, however, Chandu's thoughts had taken wing. It was just coincidence that an eagle had come and rested its weight on the small tree below which Chandu was lying. They both stared at each other for a moment but then the eagle decided that Chandu was just too small and lazy to be dangerous, and shifted its gaze elsewhere.

But Chandu wouldn't stop staring. He wasn't admiring the bird, just observing it casually when it took wing once again. The flapping of the wings sent currents of wind that made the leaves quiver furiously as if in a great storm. Chandu's eyes followed the eagle's path as it ascended in a wide sweeping arc and disappeared behind his field of vision. Chandu was too lazy to turn his head or get up to see if it had gone. There were other things he had to think of.

The eagle, however, reappeared having completed a circle, at a much higher point this time. Again Chandu's eyes followed it and again it went behind him. By the fourth time it had become a tiny spot. Would it go on ascending like that? He had never noticed this before. Did eagles keep on and on ascending? In that case they must be going to the moon. And what was beyond the moon – the stars. That's why he never saw these birds at night – they must be going to the stars in the night.

But where did the stars go during the daytime? Why couldn't he see them now? He had only glanced at the night skies without ever having thought of that. This evening he would sit and see where the stars came from, he decided. He would go home early with his flock of sheep and watch the sky as it darkened.

Then he looked at how high the sun was. It was still a long way from evening. It wasn't even noon or else Maya,

his sister, would have come with his rotis. Wasn't there any way of seeing these stars right now? His eyes scanned the blue infinity beyond with evergrowing eagerness, and hope. He tried to look deeper into the blue but there was only more blue. Still deeper he tried and still it was the same blue. His eyes were strained. He shut them to give them rest. Teardrops, hardly discernible, flowed from the corners of his eyes down his cheeks. Then he opened them again.

Suddenly he felt that he had seen a black patch, if only for a second, in the vast blueness. He blinked again and again. Yes, there was a patch of black in the blue. Now he didn't have to blink to see it. It was there like a tiny window in the sky – a small black triangle. He now stared with unblinking eyes lest he should lose it. Was it growing or was he just imagining it? It was growing!

By now it had come closer and was bigger. There was even a star visible in it. No. Many stars, Chandu realized, and got to his feet as a wave of excitement swept up his spine.

Soon the triangle of darkness was only a few feet from where Chandu stood, overjoyed. He crept up to it and peered in on all sides of the triangle only to find stars and more stars in it, glittering like gems. Some were blue-white, other reddish, and some even yellow. Quite amazed at what he was seeing, he realized that like the eagle he could walk through the stars now. As he was deciding whether he should walk in further or not, he noticed a young woman standing at one corner of the black triangle.

Instead of feeling frightened of the stranger, he felt relieved. She was standing on inky black nothingness and

yet not falling. So why couldn't he? He took one step into the darkness, then another, and he didn't fall through. "Who are you?" he enquired looking at the young woman.

She smiled and replied. "My name is Daa."

"Daa! Daa! Ha! Ha! What a funny name to have," Chandu laughed.

"And yours?" she asked.

"Oh mine ... mine is a very good name – Chandu."

"Would you like to come with me, Chandu?" she asked him.

"Oh no ... But there? No ... no ... I have to get back to Luniyas, my village, with my father's sheep ... Where will you take me?"

"Just a little further to see where the stars come from," she replied looking very earnestly at him.

"Really!" Chandu exclaimed. "But no ... I can't go. My sister will be bringing my rotis any moment now. What will she think? She'll go home crying when she doesn't find me."

"But we'll be back in a few minutes," she coaxed. Chandu looked at her, then peered back at the tree, and finally at the yawning star fields beyond.

"All right. But only if it's going to take a few minutes," Chandu decided.

And so Chandu took a walk with Daa. Whichever direction Chandu turned to there were stars and more stars till he felt his eyeballs would pop out trying to see more. Beyond the immediate disorder of star fields were ordered systems, some round, some spiral and others shaped like a discus. With each step they took, the star fields changed. Now the

stars were bigger in size. With each step the stars grew from the size of a pumpkin to the size of a thousand suns.

"Daa, the stars I see from the village are blue – why are these ones white?" Chandu asked.

Daa said, "All stars are white, Chandu. Only you are seeing them from so close for the first time."

"Oh! No one in the village knows that stars are actually white. I am going to ask my dada. Let's see if he knows," Chandu mused aloud. Then all of a sudden he stopped and took hold of Daa's beautiful hand.

"Daa! What's that black hole-like thing there? It's eating up all the stars ... what is it?"

"It's the end of the stars. That's where they all go in the end – into such black holes," Daa explained to him.

"But you promised to show me where the stars came from, not where they disappear. Oh, now I see. This is where they go in the morning, but where do they come from in the evening?"

"Oh Chandu! Don't be so foolish. Haven't you seen the mango tree in your village? The mango ...," she is saying when Chandu butts in.

"Yes, the mango tree! Oh, what lovely aam it gives ... Daa, when you come next time I will give you the aam from my grandpa's tree ... they are so sweet ..."

"Chandu," Daa says firmly. "You are not listening. Have you seen a mango?"

"Hahn ... hahn ... of course Daa, I have eaten a mango ... what are you saying?"

"What's inside it?" asks Daa.

"Oh! The seed."

"Exactly. So the tree gives the fruit and from the fruit

comes the seed and from the seed comes the tree again," Daa explains, looking expectantly at Chandu.

"I know that but ... Oh I see! The stars disappear into the black hole and then appear from it again like the seed from the tree and the tree from the seed!"

"Come, let's go in with all the stars," says Daa.

"But can we come back right away? It'll get late, Daa. It'll be evening before we can come out with all the stars. My sister will go home crying and tell my mother ... they'll spank me," Chandu protests.

"No, no. We'll be back before that. Come on."

Chandu looks into Daa's eyes for some moments trying to gauge her sincerity. Is she trying to mislead him? Is she trying to trap him and take him away? But Daa's unblinking soft eyes have the answer. Chandu realizes that he hasn't seen such a pair of eyes as Daa's. What's in them? They are so beautiful. But his own eyes shy away as they can't find any answer to his question. Daa has already taken a step ahead and is holding her hand out to lead Chandu into the black hole. Chandu takes her hand hesitantly, then firmly. He has a feeling that this lady has to be right.

Professor Dixon finished a leisurely breakfast and wiped his bushy, drooping moustache with a stiffly starched napkin. This was the scene at ten minutes to nine every morning. You could correct your watch by his punctuality. The only thing he disliked was travel assignments which prevented him from finishing his breakfast at ten minutes to nine. The ten minutes up to nine o'clock were spent smoking his long panatela cigars as his butler Hawkins cleared the table.

But today he had already smoked half his cigar when

Professor Dixon found that Hawkins hadn't cleared the table. He turned his head slowly to where he expected Hawkins to be standing but instead found his chauffeur. The Professor turned back to the table. He knew this meant some terrible urgency – one of those travel assignments he so dreaded.

"Where's Hawkins?" he asked without the slightest acknowledgment of the chauffeur's presence.

"Er ... sir, in your bedroom," the man gasped.

"What is he doing there at nine o'clock in the morning?" the Professor asked, quite annoyed.

The chauffeur rummaged in his pockets and after a few seconds brought out a small red envelope. "Sir, this came for you from headquarters."

The Professor ripped open the packet with the same dexterity as he ripped open chicken at dinner. There was a note and a few satellite photographs. He studied them unemotionally and handed them back.

"Put them in my briefcase," he said. Then, "Is the plane ready?" he asked.

"Yes sir ... I'll just help Hawkins with your luggage," the chauffeur replied.

As soon as the luggage was put in the boot Professor Dixon rose and made briskly for the door ignoring the petrified Hawkins who was hot on his heels.

To Chandu, it appeared as if he were falling down a long, black funnel with the stars falling through alongside of him. Black holes, though Chandu didn't know it, were not actually shaped like funnels. They actually dragged matter in from all sides. It was only to the observer viewing his

specific field of vision that it appeared like a funnel. Since vision totally depends on light and since light refused to follow Newtonian ideas of travelling in straight lines, due to the extreme curvature in space-time (equivalent to an extreme gravitational field in neo-Physics), Chandu's vision was distorted by the curvature. As they went deeper, the gravitational field increased, warping space-time into greater curvatures. His vision got further distorted, though it was only the starlight's curvature he was defining.

But there was an additional problem for Chandu. "Daa ... How is it that the funnel gets smaller and yet the stars and we don't collide?" he asked.

Little did he realize that the stars had contracted a million times as they were sucked into the black hole, to something the size of cricket balls. But this change in size was not apparent since Chandu had himself shrunk to the size of a microbe.

Before Daa could answer Chandu's question, Chandu shot out his next – "Oh! Daa ... look! What's happening to all the stars ahead? They are simply vanishing!" he squealed.

The velocity must have been tremendous. The next moment the stars that had been falling alongside them and after them vanished from their sight. Now the universe was no more.

"Daa! What's happened? Where are all the stars? Where are the worlds? Hai Ram! What must have happened to my home?" he shouted in consternation.

Daa smiled for the first time. "Don't worry, Chandu, your home is safe. But the stars have gone. They have vanished into nothingness."

"Nothingness? What's that?" Chandu asked.

"This is nothingness, Chandu. We are inside the black hole where everything we call objects in the outside world vanish into nothingness."

Chandu thought for a while. "I don't understand, Daa ... if this is nothingness then what's all this space, this void. I mean, isn't that something?"

"Well ... well, Chandu. Tell me can you speak or think of nothingness without a word or a thought?" Daa asked, getting serious.

Chandu tried harder this time to express nothingness – the absence of everything without a word or a thought. He had to conceive something which had neither matter, space, or time. He pictured himself sitting below the tree he had seen the eagle sit on. He tried to negate everything from his mind. He negated the tree, the eagle, the earth, the atmosphere, the stars, the moon everything. Now only space remained. He tried to negate space by imagining a superspace, and then a superspace in a superspace ... "Oh no! This will go on for ever, Daa. I can negate everything from space, say our cosmos, confined in a bigger cosmos and so on. But in the end the same question remains."

Exasperated at his failure he turned to Daa who was smiling at him, pleased.

"Then what?" he murmured to himself. "Oh god, this logic is taxing my brains too much." For a while he stared helplessly at the inky void before him. But the questions continued to rage within him.

It was at this moment that he realized what Daa might be driving him to think. "You don't mean that nothingness is something, Daa!" he cried, looking up at her.

Daa looked at him earnestly. "Of course, Chandu, that's

what it all leads to, doesn't it? Mother Nature leaves us a last residue which can neither be classified as existence or non-existence. The absence of everything, as you have seen, is still an entity to the observer."

Chandu's eyes widened further. "You mean all these stars come out of nothing and merge into nothing again?" he asked.

"No, Chandu, I mean that nothingness is an entity which logic and science cannot explain or deny. It dangles between existence and non-existence like the void which had nothing in it and yet is there."

Chandu mused at all he had heard. "Ah, I think I know an easy answer, Daa. There is no such thing as nothingness in the physical world. The void is an entity which we have not yet understood, far less defined. The day we do that we must believe that the worlds, the stars, the universes, which we pinpoint as things come out of this undefinable entity we call a void."

Daa was a bit distant to that piece of logic. Chandu felt that it didn't appeal to her or had she not understood his reasoning?

"Let's go back, Chandu," said Daa.

"But which way?" asked Chandu.

"Any way, it doesn't matter," she replied.

"In that case, you say in which direction we should walk," Chandu said.

So they walked back in the direction Daa had decided. But Chandu didn't hold Daa's hands any longer. He walked independently because he felt he knew. All of a sudden the void ended. They were at the tapering end of the funnel with stars gushing forth as water in a fountain. So this is

where all the stars came from in the evening, thought Chandu. And this is also where they all merged together in the morning. What an amazing phenomenon!

Chandu was shaken awake by his sister with hot, fresh rotis. "Uh?" he murmured. Then, "Who are you?" he asked the tall man behind her.

The man with a bushy, drooping moustache, squinted a bit as if he were trying to look deep into Chandu's mind. Then he turned to another man standing a little further behind him. "Hawkins," he called aloud, "This is another false alarm ... I don't know what those satellite photos show, but I find only a sleepy little shepherd boy at the location of the presumed abnormal magnetic field."

"Sir, why not enquire from the lad if he saw anything abnormal?" Hawkins said timidly.

Professor Dixon had, however, made up his mind. There was no point in enquiring about abnormal magnetic fields from a village boy in faraway India. Just as the two turned to move back to their car parked in the fields beyond, Dixon changed his mind. "Er ... little boy," he said turning back, "Did you see anything abnormal around here?"

Chandu, wide awake now, stood up in awe. "I saw nothing, sir," he said.

"See! He saw nothing. Count on my experience, Hawkins," the Professor retorted triumphantly.

Dark Storm and Bright Pearl

Mala Marwah
Illustrated by the author

nce a great storm gathered over the sea. It grew and grew until it collected into a vast battalion of the blackest clouds ever seen, until all the sky was frowning menacingly. It threatened and groaned and then like an army advancing began slowly to cross over the water into the land. But it did not empty its clouds and rain.

As it marched forward, a terrible howling wind, deafening thunder and blinding flashes of lightning accompanied it, all the trees, even the mightiest banyans which had stood for centuries, bowed before it, and some were uprooted. But still it did not rain.

Presently it came upon a quiet valley, protected from the wind. There were huts, a stream, and sounds of work and laughter. People tilled land, sold vegetables and fowl, washed clothes, laughed and talked; children skipped rope and squabbled; flowers bloomed everywhere, gulab and sadabahar, and bees droned in the sun.

When Dark Storm saw this happy sight it could not keep its terrible temper. All its fury gathered upon its brow, and in a rage it swept like the hand of death upon the sunny

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valley below. It rained in torrents, the raindrops like knives and the wind like a scythe. A grim bank of black clouds hid the destruction below. When Dark Storm passed there was nothing left in the valley.

When people in the other village heard of this tragedy they were frightened, but no one had the courage to help the destroyed village. "The storm didn't hit us; why should we care?" they said. Hearing this Dark Storm felt secretly happy. "No one will come to their aid," it thought, "And when I strike the other villages, no one will come to theirs. I may devastate the world as I please. These humans care nothing at all for each other." It then sang its terrible song of victory, roaring, thundering:

What is good, what is bad?
None knows, none dares.
Who is happy, who is sad?
None shows, none cares.

It then swept forward on its way, laying waste the countryside. In the day the clouds hid the sun; in the night their shadows obscured the stars. One by one each village that had thought itself safe was destroyed. All over the land people knew they were doomed; the sky began to blacken across the earth. But they knew they could do nothing now because they had done nothing to help each other or stand united against Dark Storm. They realized the terrible cost of fighting among themselves. As marked people they watched the sky with blank eyes, waiting for the storm.

But in one corner of the silent land a miracle was just beginning. Between the branches of a withered tree a lonely

nest showed signs of life. From it a brilliant white bird, no bigger than a sparrow, with plumage that shone like an oceanful of pearls, soft and iridiscent, came fluttering out like a dream on the bleak hillside. It looked, from afar, like a tiny, lonely white cloud of silken fluff on the dark landscape. Then this bird that shone like a pearl flew down into the ruined valley where once there had been singing and laughter and the sadabahar had bloomed, and where nothing now grew or stirred.

Circling around stumps and rubbish she came to rest on a broken fence. Here she perched and in her high, clear voice sang so beautifully that the only survivor of the village, a woodcutter, came out of his ruin and tried to see the bird from close. As he did so she flew to a high branch; he gathered up his only possession, a small handkerchief of uncooked dal, and followed her. She flew farther and farther away, over rocks and fields until she led the woodcutter far, far away from his village.

For three days and three nights he followed her. At the end of the third day the bird that shone like a pearl alighted on a tree. Before the leafless trunk and branches lay the ruins of another village Dark Storm had struck and destroyed. Seeing this the woodcutter stood stunned. Then he ran searching among the fallen houses. "*Ohe, is anyone there? Is anyone there, ohe!*" He was rewarded with the distant sound of another human voice, "I am here, I am here, I am here."

He raced to the source of the voice. It was an old woman. He lifted her up gently and made her rest against the tree. Striking two stones he made a fire; in the shell of a broken water pot he boiled the grains of dal in water from a

narrow stream and shared a few spoonfuls with the old woman. As they talked they realized that the bird, Bright Pearl, had brought the woodcutter here. They knew they must follow her to other people and save each other and the world from the fury of Dark Storm.

Over the sad land they travelled, finding odd survivors in deserted ruins. Bright Pearl led them as though she knew exactly where to go. Even in the darkest night they followed her, her frail silken shape glinting like a dim star through the dark clouds and sky.

Now they were a group of twenty, now seventy, now one hundred, now three hundred. As they travelled, searching for other survivors, they collected firewood, edible roots, grains, fruits; they salvaged useful domestic articles, materials to build shelters with and tools and implements to help them farm and build; rounded up stray buffaloes and goats for milk and cheese, and sheep for wool and warmth. Soon their numbers had swelled to a thousand. Finally, Bright Pearl stopped on the side of a mountain, one side of which lay bare with uprooted trees, and one side still remained green, because it lay on the other side of the mountain, curved inwards and sloping down to a small valley, and therefore protected. This side of the mountain was dotted with caves, and fed with underground streams. Bright Pearl, leading the procession of people, flew over the openings to the caves, hidden behind rocks and vegetation, then rested on a branch as people began climbing up the slopes, inspecting the caves and settling down in them.

Here, they began to plan how they would protect themselves. They straightened up every young sapling, and tended the ground around other trees they would grow to hold the earth firm.

Taking large flat stones, they laid them against the walls of the caves to secure them. They agreed to break no branches for fuel, but gathered dead wood which had fallen, and pine cones and dead leaves which they mixed with a little dung and used sparingly. Most of the dung was dried and stored for manure, as it would enrich the soil when used. They began looking for seeds and pods which they dried and kept, waiting for a time when they could plant them. They began to scatter a few grains for birds and small animals outside.

Smoke from their cooking fires could be seen from various points on the mountainside, and birds began to flit about and chatter near the hidden caves.

Dark Storm, passing at a distance, saw this strange detail. "Activity? Smoke from fires? I thought I had destroyed everything here," it said to itself. "Can it be that I had overlooked some still living people?" It blew nearer, rumbling slowly. Yes! There were signs of living! Animals and murmur of voices, and birds flitting about for titbits and scattered crumbs!

Its rage was enormous. It would level them all, it thought, in a mere matter of minutes. Circling right round the mountain it gathered its strength, then swept like a screaming meteor from one side of the mountain to the next, and went wailing over the valley onto the next mountain to survey its work. Looking back it saw many uprooted trees and loosened boulders which had come crashing down. It was raining heavily and the narrow paths were being washed away. Once more there was a terrible silence, broken only by the storm clouds growling and the

wind moaning like wounded ghosts, as it rained in sheets.

Satisfied, Dark Storm retreated, a little tired but smug.

But this time, when the clouds cleared from the hillside, small tendrils of smoke reappeared from the hidden caves. People were calling out to each other. Once more the birds flitted about, among them Bright Pearl.

From a great distance, Dark Storm saw the smoke from the fires again. Still alive! Humans tending their hearths! It began to feel worried. Something is wrong, it thought. What could it be? It was also very tired by now, because laying the world waste had exhausted it. Also, it had suffered the worst thing – *loss of face*. It had stormed and thundered as before. It would lose its standing as the indomitable Dark Storm. It drew closer to the mountain. Here, as a last effort at appearing victorious, it sang its chilling song:

What is good, what is bad?
None knows, none dares.
Who is happy, who is sad?
None shows, none cares.

To its amazement, a tiny silken piece of fluff, Bright Pearl, came out above the caves and flew high over the tallest treetops. Here she hovered and sang in her clear voice:

What is good, what is bad?
Darkness dies when
brightness bares.
Who is happy, who is sad?
Miser weeps when
glad heart shares.

As she sang the rescued people came out of their caves,

chanting the words together – parents, old people, children and animals. They all stood outside their caves at different points of the mountainside, facing Dark Storm.

Then something strange happened. As they chanted, something in the tremor and emotion of their voices scared Dark Storm. It was the strength that came to them from brotherhood and unity. Before it, it knew it was defeated.

Dark Storm began to inch backwards as the chanting grew louder and the people began pouring down the mountainside, led by Bright Pearl. Dark Storm had now begun to retreat with speed. Now it had travelled over three mountain ranges, now ten; now it was far out of sight. It ran far away, in shameful defeat, to do penance and to hide forever. It flew up to the highest Himalayas; gathering itself into a small knot of roaring winds that fought with each other, it waited many days for its troubled heart to quieten down; and then it became a hermit. As it meditated it turned into a lump of stone, which jutted out from one side of the mountain like an odd-looking rock.

And that was how Dark Storm was defeated and stilled forever. If you ever climb up that high mountain to Hermit's Point, you will hear a far-off roar of winds faintly in your ear; some say it is just the winds on that rocky point. It is an eerie sort of roar, but that is all that remains to remind us of the storm that nearly destroyed the earth.

Far below, however, in the foothills and on the plains, life had long begun to return to the still earth. Above the murmur of people and animals Bright Pearl flew like an enchanted beam of light, while below the gulab and sadabahar opened their petals, and the first bees returned, humming to greet the beautiful day.

The Little World of Sadananda

Satyajit Ray
Translated from Bangla by the Author
Drawing by Sujata Singh

I am feeling quite cheerful today, so this is a good time to tell you everything. I know you will believe me. You are not like my people; they only laugh at me. They think I am making it up. So I have stopped talking to them.

It is midday now, so there is no one in my room. They will come in the afternoon. Now there are only two here – myself and my friend Lal Bahadur. Lal Bahadur Singh! Oh, how worried I was for his sake yesterday! I couldn't believe he would ever come back to me. He is very clever, so he was able to escape unhurt. Anyone else would have been finished by now.

How silly of me! I have told you my friend's name, but haven't told you my own.

My name is Sadananda Chakraborty. It sounds like a bearded old man, doesn't it? Actually, I am only thirteen. I can't help it if my name is old-fashioned. After all, I didn't choose it; it was my grandma.

If she only knew how much trouble it would cause

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me, she would surely have called me something else. How could she have known that people could pester me by saying, "Why are you so glum when your name means ever-happy?" Such fools! As if laughing like a jackass was the only way to show that one was happy. There are so many kinds of being happy when one doesn't even smile.

For instance, suppose there's a twig sticking out of the ground and you find a grasshopper landing on its tip again and again. It would certainly make you happy to see it, but if you burst out laughing at it, people would think you were out of your mind. Like that mad uncle of mine. I never saw him, but I was told that he laughed all the time. Even when they had to put him in chains, he found it so funny that he almost split his sides laughing. The truth is, I get fun out of things which most people don't even notice. Even when I am lying in bed I notice things which make me happy. Sometimes a cotton seed would come floating in through the window. Small wispy things which the slightest breath of air would send wafting hither and thither. What a happy sight it is! If it came floating down towards you, you blew on it and sent it shooting up into the air again.

And if a crow came and settled on the window, watching it was like watching a circus clown. I always go absolutely still when a crow comes and sits nearby, and watch its antics out of the corner of my eyes.

But if you ask me what gives me most fun, I would say – watching ants. Of course, it is no longer just funny; it is – but no, I mustn't tell everything now or the fun will be spoilt. It's better that I begin at the beginning.

Once, about a year ago, I had fever. It was nothing new, as I am often laid up with fever. I catch a chill rather

easily. Mother says it's because I spend so much time out of doors sitting on the grass.

As always, the first couple of days in bed was fun. A nice, chilly feeling mixed with a feeling of laziness. Added to this was the fun of not having to go to school. I lay in bed watching a squirrel climbing up the madar tree outside the window when mother came and gave me a bitter mixture to drink. I drank it up like a good boy and then took the glass of water, drank some of it and blew the rest out of the window in a spray. I wrapped the blanket around me and was about to close my eyes for a doze when I noticed something.

A few drops of water had fallen on the window sill, and in one of these drops a small black ant was trying desperately to save itself from drowning. I found it so strange that I propped myself up on my elbows and leaned forward to bring my eyes up close to the ant.

As I watched intently, it suddenly seemed as if the ant was not an ant any more but a man. In fact, it reminded me of Jhontu's brother-in-law who had slipped down the bank into a pond while fishing and, not being able to swim, wildly thrashed his arms about to keep himself afloat. In the end he was saved by Jhontu's elder brother and their servant Narahari.

As soon as I recalled the incident, I had a wish to save the ant.

Although I had fever, I jumped out of bed, ran out of the room, rushed into my father's study and tore off a piece of blotting paper from his writing pad. Then I ran back into my room, jumped onto the bed and held the blotting paper so its edge touched the drop of water.

The water was sucked up in no time.

The suddenly rescued ant seemed not to know which way to go. It rushed about this way and that for a while, and then disappeared down in the drainpipe on the far side of the sill. No more ants appeared on the sill that day.

The next day the fever went up. Around midday mother came and said, "Why are you staring at the window? You should try and get some sleep."

I shut my eyes to please mother, but as soon as she left, I opened them again and looked at the drainpipe.

In the afternoon, when the sun was behind the madar tree, I saw an ant poking its head out of the mouth of the pipe. Suddenly it came out and started to move briskly about on the sill.

Although all black ants look alike, I somehow had the feeling that this was the same ant which had nearly drowned yesterday. I had acted as his friend, so he had come to pay me a visit.

I had made my plans beforehand. I had brought some sugar from the pantry, wrapped it up in paper and put it beside my pillow. I now opened the wrapper, took out a large grain of sugar and put it on the sill.

The ant seemed startled and stopped in its tracks. Then it cautiously approached the sugar and prodded it with its head from all sides. Then it suddenly made for the drainpipe and disappeared into it.

I thought: that's odd. I gave him such a nice grain of sugar and he left it behind. Why did he have to come at all if not for food?

The doctor came in a short while. He felt my pulse, looked at my tongue and placed the stethoscope on my

chest and back. Then he said that I must take some more of the bitter mixture and the fever would go in a couple of days. That didn't make me happy at all. No fever meant going to school, and going to school meant not watching the drainpipe in the afternoon when the ants came out. Anyway, as soon as the doctor left, I turned towards the window and was delighted to see a whole army of black ants coming out of the drainpipe onto the sill. The leader must be the ant I knew, and he must have informed the other ants of the grain of sugar and led them to it.

Watching for a while I was able to see for myself how clever the ants were. All the ants now banded together to push the grain towards the drainpipe. I can't describe how funny it was. I imagined that if they had been coolies pushing a heavy weight, they'd have shouted, "*All together, heave ho! A little further, heave ho! That's the spirit, heave ho!*"

After my fever was gone, school was a bore for a few days. My thoughts would go back again and again to the window sill. There must be ants coming there every afternoon. I would leave a few grains of sugar on the sill every morning before going to school, and when I returned in the afternoon I would find them gone.

In the class I used to sit at a desk towards the middle of the room. Beside me sat Sital. One day I was a little late and found Phani sitting in my place. So I had no choice but to sit at the back of the class, in front of the wall. In the last period before recess we read history. In his thin, piping voice Haradhan Babu the history teacher was describing how brave Hannibal was. Hannibal had led an army from Carthage and had crossed the Alps to invade Italy.

As I listened, I suddenly had the feeling that

Hannibal's army was in the classroom and was on the march very close to me.

I looked around and my eyes travelled to the wall behind me. Down the wall ran a long line of ants – hundreds of small black ants, exactly like a mighty army on the way to battle. I looked down and found a crack in the wall near the floor through which the ants were going out.

As soon as the bell rang for the recess, I ran to the back of our classroom and spotted the crack. The ants were coming out of it and making their way through the grass towards a guava tree.

I followed the ants and found, at the foot of the guava tree, something which can only be described as a castle.

It was a mound of earth with a tiny opening at the base through which the ants entered.

I had a great urge to look inside the castle.

I had my pencil in my pocket, and with its tip I began carefully to dig into the mound. At first I found nothing inside, but digging a little further, I had the surprise of my life. I found there were countless small chambers inside the mound, and a maze of passages leading from one chamber to another. How very strange! How could ants build such a castle with their tiny arms and legs? How could they be so clever? Do they have schools where they are taught? Do they also learn from books, draw pictures, build things? Does that mean they are no different from human beings except in looks? How is it that they can build their own house while tigers, elephants, bears, horses can't? Even Bhulo, my pet dog, can't.

Of course, birds build nests. But how many birds can live in a single nest? Can the birds build a castle

where thousands of them can live?

Because I had spoilt a part of the mound, there was a great flurry amongst the ants. I felt sorry for them. I thought: now that I have done them harm, I must make up by doing them a good turn, or they will look upon me as their enemy, which I was not. I was truly their friend.

So the next day I took half of a sweetmeat which mother gave me to eat, wrapped it up in a sal leaf and carried it in my pocket to school. Just before the bell rang for the classes to begin, I put the sweetmeat by the anthill. The ants must have to travel to find food; today they'll find it right at their doorstep. Surely this was doing them a good turn.

In a few weeks the summer holidays began and my friendship with ants began to grow. I would tell the elders about my observation of how ants behaved, but they paid no attention to me. What really put my back up was when they laughed at me. So I decided not to tell anybody anything. Whatever I did, I would do on my own and keep what I learned to myself.

One day, in the afternoon, I sat by the compound wall of Pintu's house watching a hill made by red ants. People will say that you can't sit near red ants for long because they bite. I have been bitten by red ants myself, but of late I have noticed that they don't bite me. So I was watching them without fear when I suddenly saw Chhiku striding up.

I haven't mentioned Chhiku yet. His real name is Srikumar. He is in the same class as me, but he must be older than me because there's a thin line of moustache above his lips. Chhiku is a bully, so nobody likes him. I usually don't meddle with him because he is stronger than me. Chhiku saw me and called out, "You there, you silly ass,

what are you doing squatting there on the ground?" I didn't pay any attention to him. He came up towards me. I kept my eyes on the ants.

Chhiku drew up and said, "Well, what are you up to? I don't like the look of it."

I made no attempt to hide what I was doing and told him the truth. Chhiku made a face and said, "What do you mean – watching ants? What is there to watch? And aren't there ants in your own house that you have to come all the way here?"

I felt very angry. What is it to you what I do? Why poke your nose into other people's affairs?

I said, "I'm watching them because I like doing so. You know nothing about ants. Why don't you mind your own business? Why come and bother me?"

Chhiku hissed like an angry cat and said, "So you like watching ants, eh? Well – there! There! There!" Before I could do or say anything, Chhiku had levelled the anthill with three vicious jabs of his heel, thereby squashing at least five hundred ants.

Chhiku gave a hollow laugh and was about to walk away when something suddenly happened to me. I jumped up on Chhiku's back, grabbed hold of his hair, and knocked his head four or five times against Pintu's compound wall. Then I let go of him. Chhiku burst into tears and went off.

When I got back home, I learnt that Chhiku had already been to complain against me.

But I was surprised when at first mother neither scolded nor beat me. Perhaps she hadn't believed Chhiku, because I'd never hit anyone before. Besides, mother knew that I was scared of Chhiku. But when mother asked what had

happened, I couldn't lie to her.

Mother was very surprised. "You mean you really bashed his head against the wall?"

I said, "Yes, I did. And why only Chhiku? I would do the same to anyone who trampled on anthills." This made mother so angry that she slapped me.

It was a Saturday. Father came back from the office early. When he heard from mother what had happened he locked me up in my room.

Although my cheeks smarted from the slaps, I wasn't really sorry for myself. I was very sorry for the ants. Once in Sahibgunj where cousin Parimal lives, there was a collision between two trains which killed three hundred people. Today it took Chhiku only a few seconds to kill so many ants!

It seemed so wrong, so very, very wrong.

As I lay in bed thinking of all that had happened, I suddenly felt a little chilly and had to draw the blanket over me.

And then I went off to sleep. I was awakened by a strange noise. A thin, high-pitched sound, very beautiful, going up and down in a regular beat, like a song.

I pricked up my ears and looked around but couldn't make out where the sound came from. Probably someone far away was singing. But I had never heard such singing before.

Look who's here! Come out of the drainpipe while I was listening to the strange sound.

This time I clearly recognized him – the ant I had saved from drowning. He was facing me and salaaming me by raising his two front legs and touching his head with them. What shall I call this black creature? Kali, Krishna? I must think about it. After all, one can't have a friend without

a name. I put my hand on the window sill palm upwards. The ant brought his legs down from the head and crawled slowly towards my hand. Then it climbed up my little finger and started scurrying over the crisscross lines on my palm.

Just then I gave a start as I heard a sound from the door, and the ant clambered down and disappeared into the drainpipe.

Now mother came into the room and gave me a glass of milk. Then she felt my forehead and said I had fever again.

Next morning the doctor came. Mother said, "He had been restless the whole night, and kept saying Kali again and again." Mother, probably thought I was praying to the Goddess Kali, because I hadn't told her about my new friend.

The doctor had put the stethoscope on my back when I heard the song again. It was louder than yesterday and the tune was different. It seemed to come from the window, but since the doctor had asked me to keep still, I couldn't turn my head to see.

The doctor finished his examination, and I cast a quick glance towards the window. Hullo there! It was a large black ant this time, and this one too was salaaming me. Are all ants my friends then? And was it this ant which was singing?

But mother said nothing about a song. Did it mean she couldn't hear it?

I turned towards mother to ask her, and found her staring at the ant with fear in her eyes. The next moment she picked up my arithmetic notebook from the table, leaned over me and with one slap of the book squashed the ant. The same moment the singing stopped.

"The whole house is crawling with ants!" said mother. "Just think what would happen if one crawled inside your ear."

The doctor left after giving me an injection. I looked at the dead ant. He was killed while singing a beautiful song. Just like my great uncle Indranath. He too used to sing classical songs, which I didn't understand very well. One day he was playing the tanpura and singing when he suddenly died. When he was taken to the crematorium in a procession, a group of kirtan singers went along singing songs in praise of God Hari. I watched it and still remember it, although I was then very small.

And today a strange thing happened. I fell asleep after the injection and dreamed that, like the funeral of great uncle Indranath, a dozen or so ants were bearing the dead ant on their shoulders while a line of ants followed singing a chorus.

I woke up in the afternoon when mother put her cool hand on my forehead.

I glanced at the window and found that the dead ant was no longer there.

This time the fever kept on for several days. No wonder, because everyone in the house had started killing ants. How can the fever go if you have to listen to the screaming of ants the whole day?

And there was another problem. While the ants were being killed in the pantry, hordes of ants turned up on my window sill and wept. I could see that they wanted me to do something for them – either stop the killing or punish those who were doing the misdeed but since I was laid up with fever, I could do nothing about it. Even if I were well, how could a small boy like me stop the elders from what they were doing?

But one day, I was forced to do something about it.

I don't exactly remember what day it was, but I do

remember that I had woken up at the crack of dawn and right away heard mother announcing that an ant had got into Phatik's ear and bitten him.

I was tickled by the news but just then I heard the slapping of brooms on the floor and knew that they were killing ants.

Then something very strange happened. I heard thin voices shouting, "Help us! Help us, please!" I looked at the window and found that a large group of ants had gathered on the sill and were running around wildly.

Hearing them cry out I could no longer keep calm. I forgot about my fever, jumped out of bed and ran out of the room. At first I didn't know what to do. Then I took up a clay pot which was lying on the floor and smashed it. Then I started to smash all the things I could find which would break. It was a clever ruse because it certainly stopped the killing of ants. But it made my parents, my aunts, my cousin Sabi all come out of their rooms, grab hold of me, put me back on my bed and lock the door of my room.

I had a good laugh, though, and the ants on my window kept saying, "Thank you! Thank you!" and went back into the drainpipe again.

Soon after this I had to leave home. The doctor examined me one day and said I should be sent to hospital for treatment.

Now I am in a hospital room. I've been here these last four days.

The first day I felt very sad because the room was so clean that I knew there couldn't be any ants in it. Being a new room, there were no cracks or holes in the walls. There wasn't even a cupboard for ants to hide under or behind it.

But there was a mango tree just outside the window, and one of its branches was within reach.

I thought if there was a place to find ants it would be on that branch.

But the first day I couldn't get near the window. How could I since I was never alone? Either the nurse, or the doctor, or someone from my house was always in the room. The second day too was just as bad.

I was so upset that I threw a medicine bottle on the floor and broke it. It made the doctor quite angry. He was not a nice doctor, this new one. I could tell that from his bristling moustache and from the thick glasses he wore.

One the third day, something happened. There was only a nurse in my room then, and she was reading a book. I was in bed wondering what to do. I heard a thud and saw that the book had slipped from the nurse's hand and fallen on the floor. The nurse had dozed off.

I got down from the bed and went to the window on tiptoe. Leaning out of the window and stretching my body as far as it would go, I grabbed hold of the mango branch and began to pull it towards me.

This made a noise which woke up the nurse, and then the fireworks started.

The nurse gave a scream, came rushing towards me and, wrapping her arms around me, dragged me to the bed and dumped me on it. Others, too, came into the room just then, so I could do nothing more.

The doctor promptly gave me an injection.

I could make out from what they were saying that they thought I had meant to throw myself out of the window. Silly people! If I had thrown myself from such a height, all

my bones would have been crushed and I would have died.

After the doctor left I felt sleepy. I thought of the window by my bed at home and felt very sorry. Who knows when I shall be back home again?

I had nearly fallen asleep when I heard a thin voice saying, "Sepoys at your service, sir – sepoys at your service!"

I opened my eyes and saw two large red ants standing with their chests out by the medicine bottle on the bedside table.

They must have climbed onto my hand from the mango branch without my knowing it.

I said, "Sepoys?"

The answer came, "Yes, sir – at your service."

"What are your names?" I asked them.

One said, "Lal Bahadur Singh." And the other said, "Lal Chand Pandey."

I was very pleased. But I warned them that they must go into hiding when people came into the room, or they might be killed. Lal Chand and Lal Bahadur salaamed and said, "Very well, sir." Then the two of them sang a lovely duet which lulled me to sleep.

I must tell you right away what happened yesterday, because it's nearly five and the doctor will be here soon. In the afternoon I was watching Lal Chand and Lal Bahadur wrestling on the table while I lay in bed. I was supposed to be asleep, but the pills and the injection hadn't worked. Or, to be quite truthful, I wilfully kept myself awake. If I slept in the afternoon, when would I play with my new friends?

The two ants both fought gamely and it was hard to say who would win when suddenly there was a sound of heavy footsteps. The doctor was coming!

I made a sign and Lal Bahadur promptly disappeared below the table. But Lal Chand had been thrown on his back and was thrashing his legs about, so he couldn't run away. And that was what caused the nasty incident.

The doctor came, and saw the ant, and saying some rude words in English, swept it off the table with his hand.

I could tell Lal Chand was badly hurt from his scream, but what could I do? By that time the doctor had grabbed my hand to feel my pulse. I tried to get up, but the nurse held me down.

After the examination, the doctor as usual made a glum face and scratched the edge of his moustache. He was about to turn towards the door when he suddenly screwed up his face, gave a leap and yelled "Ouch!" three times in English.

Then all hell broke loose. The stethoscope flew out of his hand, his spectacles jumped off his nose and crashed onto the floor. One of the buttons of his jacket came off as he struggled to take it off, his tie wound tighter around his neck and made him gasp and sputter before at last he managed to pull it free, the hole in his vest showed as he yanked off his shirt, jumping around and yelling all the time. I was speechless.

The nurse said, "What is the matter, sir?"

The doctor continued to jump about and yelled, "Ant! Red ant! It crawled up my arm – *ouch*!"

Well, well, well! I knew this would happen, and it serves you right! Lal Bahadur had taken revenge on his friend's behalf.

If they saw me now they would know how deliriously happy Sadananda could be.

Who Wants Green Fingers Anyway?

Geeta Dharmarajan
Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

If I'd had the guts, I'd have cut out "WALKING TIME BOMB! WATCH OUT!!" on a potato and stamped it on the back of Amma's blouse that day. She was that mad. And it was all because of her potted plants. She kept them in her veranda, like all her friends who lived in our colony did and Amma took it as a personal insult when their plants did better than hers. Now she was just staring down at her plants spread all over the veranda and saying that she didn't know of one good reason why they should be wilting and drooping all over the place at our house when they were green as emerald, lush as tropical growth in other verandas, when who should walk in but Appa.

Appa pushed the front door open, strode in, stubbed his shoe against the monstera plant, stumbled over Amma's rubber plant and crashed down on the philodendron. His briefcase flew out of his hand, fell against my cycle standing quietly in one corner and sent it careening down on the pile of earth and manure, covering Appa's hair and clothes with enough soil to make him sprout branches if he'd been a

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seed. I thought Appa would say, "So, what are these plants doing, right bang in my way?"

But Appa never does manage to say the right thing at the right time and place (so Amma always complains). And now, after he'd wiped his specs clean, he peered short-sightedly around him and said: "Your plants are dying, aren't they?"

And the "time bomb" quivered, glowed red and erupted into silence.

"It's summer," I said defensively. "Nonsense!" said Appa. "I just saw Padma's potted plants and they looked blooming healthy!"

It was the wrong thing to say, of course. But how was Appa to know?

I thought for a moment that Amma was going to burst into tears, but she managed beautifully.

"Padma sings to her plants every day," she said in a choked voice.

My sister giggled. But Appa scorched her glee with a glance.

"Perhaps you'd like to sing and story-tell our plants to sleep?" asked Amma sweetly.

"Why not?" asked Appa coolly.

"Good!" retorted Amma. "Perhaps we'll have plants like Padma's then. She told me today that when Vijay said he wanted to tear a leaf from her money plant for his project work, the plant registered emotion. She says that it positively wilted on hearing those words!"

Ah! Just the kind of improbable thing that keeps happening in Vijay's house. Why is it that only *he* sees a cow with four ears in his garden, or a ghost of a lady who

walks on moonless nights with ghungroos on? I don't believe him or his mother now, but I heard Appa saying, "I can believe that. Plants are like babies!"

"Babies?" asked Amma spiritedly. "Then I've had enough of them! I've brought up two (she meant me and my sister, of course) as well as I could, and now *these* babies are all yours!"

There was a strange glint in Appa's eyes. "A challenge!" he cried. He bowed Sir Walter Raleigh style, doffed an imaginary cap in Amma's direction and said, "I'll not disappoint you, Madam!"

"You stay away from these plants!" he said to no one in particular the next day as he marched into the house with a load of books ... four from the British Council Library, five from the American Library and an assorted collection of dog-eared books from various friends ... all on house plants and how to keep them happy.

That Saturday and Sunday there was not even a mouse of a stir from Appa. Then, Sunday evening he emerged from his cocoon, all set to show off his new-found knowledge.

"Looking after plants does not start and stop with singing to them!" he said grandly. And he diagnosed that all our plants had grown "tight," that they were "potbound."

Amma was out on her weekly shopping, and I was the only one around he could show off to. Sad!

"How do you know?" I asked suspiciously.

"I'll show you!" he said promptly.

And as he looked around, he told me how plants' roots got all tangled up and stunted when they had to keep growing inside pots that had grown too small for them.

Then, he said, the roots might come peeping out through the drainage hole.

He chose the biggest pot that Amma had (the monstera) and picked it up. I peered at the bottom carefully. There were no roots peeping from anywhere.

"This plant's not potbound!" I said.

"Ah! Just you wait and see what's inside!" murmured Appa. "To check roots, you hold the pot in your right hand, like this, and you spread the fingers of your left hand over the top ..."

"You're going to DRO ..."

CR ... ASH! Went the pot. My mother's favourite monstera lay in shambles. I was dismayed, but Appa seemed to take it in his stride. "Not to worry!" he said. "I made the mistake of starting with the biggest pot we had. Lesson number one: never overestimate your own strength!"

He bent down and picked up Amma's rubber plant.

"Do you think you should?" I had to ask.

"Have trust in your father, boy!" admonished Appa as he continued with his lesson. "Now, after inverting the pot and holding it with one hand, you hold it such that the stem comes between ... *damn!*... the second and ... *oof!*... third finger of the left hand!"

"You should have perhaps done this before you turned the pot over!" said Big-Mouth-Me, as I watched him juggle his fingers so they'd rest in the right places. But all I got in thanks was a maha glare.

"Now," said Appa when he'd finally managed, "You tap the pot smartly on ... *um* ... this veranda ledge."

KER-RACK! We solemnly surveyed the shattering attack on the second pot.

"It should have been as easy as making mud pies. That's what the book said," muttered Appa. "The soil should have separated so that I was left with the pot in my right hand and the plant in my left."

I remembered to keep quiet.

"That's two of your mother's favourite plants," said Appa thoughtfully.

I nodded my head.

"So what do we do now?" he wondered aloud.

I knew what was bothering him. Amma'd be back within an hour or so, and though they did fight sometimes, I knew that Appa wouldn't want to see Amma feel hurt. And she'd feel *so* hurt if ...

"Okay!" said Appa suddenly, breaking into my thoughts. "Go see if Saroja (our Dai) is there, and ask her if she could come and clean up this mess, and you ..."

He shot out the commands and marched out.

"And the plants?" I wondered, looking at the monstera with two of its huge, glossy green, cheese-holed leaves torn, and the rubber plant with its stem broken in half in the awkward fall it'd had when it had plunged, leaves first, from the ledge.

But I needn't have worried.

When Amma came back everything was as normal as normal can be. Except that Appa had ventured into the kitchen and made two cups of steaming hot, south Indian, filter-brewed "decoction" coffee.

"*You* made coffee?" asked Amma incredulously.

"Yes," said Appa gently. "In appreciation. I don't have the kind of knack that you have with plants. I hand it to you!"

"Oh!" said Amma, and "Oh!" again. When she'd finally recovered from Appa's rare compliment she asked if her plants were okay.

"What do you mean okay? Of course they're okay!" said Appa indignantly.

And of course they were. Because, while Saroja had cleaned up the mess, and I'd carefully smuggled the broken plants and pots away, Appa had taken a brisk walk to the nursery round the corner and bought almost identical matches for the monstera and rubber plants that had been Amma's.

You know, I keep telling myself, with any other father, a kid could have resorted to blackmail but then I'm a decent kind of chap so …

The Journey

Swapna Dutta
Art by Suddhasattwa Basu

Slowly ... inevitably the train slid out of the station. Twilight lingered yet over the hilltops. The sky was a mass of red and gold. Sumit, who sat by the window, held one of the bars in a tight grip. This was the first time that he was travelling alone. The prospect did not thrill him as much as he had thought it would. In fact, he had a blank, void sort of feeling inside. As though all the switches in his mind had suddenly been turned off.

Sumit had just said goodbye to his mother who was the principal of a school in this small hill station in UP. She lived in a tiny bungalow tucked away in a corner of the school compound. All by herself. Except that is, for Raja the dog and Mithu the parrot. There were green fields all round where Raja loved to rush about, chasing the cats, goats and other creatures which dared to stray in! Sumit who was seeing the place for the first time had loved it at first sight. He was seeing his mother after a long while too – although she didn't seem any different from the picture in his room, holding him in her arms as a two year old baby. Except for the streaks of grey in her hair.

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In her photograph her hair was raven black!

The train was picking up speed as it made its way through a thick wood with tall trees. "Couldn't you get any books for me, Papa?" asked the girl who sat by the window on the opposite berth.

"Sorry, dear, but there were none you'd have liked," replied her father.

Sumit did not hear what the girl said and looked out of the windows once again, his thoughts racing back to the past. He had not even known that he had a mother! Alive, that is. No one ever mentioned her. Not father, nor grandmother. Nor anyone else! It had been just like this ... ever since that day, long, long ago, when he had returned from school and found grandma waiting on the steps for him instead of his mother.

"Where is Mama?" he had cried out in surprise. "When did you come, Grandma?"

"Mama has gone far away. I've come to look after you now," his grandma replied, picking him up.

"But why didn't she take me too? When will she come back?" he had asked with quivering lips.

"She won't come back, dear."

He had burst into tears, crying "I want Mama! I want Mama!" He could still remember how bitterly he had cried! Grandma had made no attempt to stop him at first. "All right, poppet," she had said after a while. "Both you and I shall go and look for her when you are older and have learnt how to ride a horse."

"A horse?" he had cried. "I don't see any horses here! Only cars and trams and buses!"

"Then we'll go to a place where there are horses and

you can learn to ride like the prince in a story. Wouldn't it be fun if you found a flying horse?"

"I'd rather fly an aeroplane right over the clouds!"

"An aeroplane it shall be! Now come and eat the delicious mava-cat I've made for you. With eyes of raisins! Then we'll go to the zoo!"

The train stopped suddenly with a jerk. Sumit frowned as he looked out of the window. "Why has the train stopped here?" he heard the girl asking her father.

"No idea. No signal, I guess," he replied. Sumit stood up, intending to walk down the aisle and peep out of the door when the train started moving again. He sat down and silently picked up his chain of thoughts ... Racing back to the days of childhood!

Gradually, little by little, he had got used to mama's absence because grandma was always there. To love him, cuddle him, tell him stories and kiss away his hurts. As he grew older, he took it for granted that his mother was dead and that "far away place" was no other than heaven. That is why his father never mentioned her. Nor did anyone else. Perhaps it pained them to speak of her. Maybe that was why they looked at him strangely when he said that he had no mother.

Somehow, the days had always been so full that there had been no time for brooding. Or noticing if anything was strange or out of the way. Holidays meant either going to the seaside with his grandma or going to visit his aunt at Kanpur. Father was too busy to go with them. But these holidays had been different. And totally unexpected.

"I'm going to Nainital on business," his father had said

abruptly on the eve of his summer holidays. "Like to come with me?"

"Oh yes, Papa!" he had cried eagerly. "Both Grandma and I are quite tired of the seaside!"

"Grandma is not coming with us," said his father, arranging his papers. "She is going to Kanpur to visit your aunt. You may go with her if you like."

"Oh no! I'd much rather go with you ... "

"Very well. That's settled, then. By the way, you were thirteen last January, weren't you?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Old enough to look after yourself even if ... never mind!"

Almost before he had time to think, his new suitcase was packed.

"Must I have a new suitcase?" he had asked, amazed. "Isn't there room in Papa's big one?"

"You're a big boy now. Better learn to take care of your own things," said papa.

"I hope you are doing the right thing," grandma had said doubtfully, looking father straight in the eye. "I hope you're not making another big mistake!"

Sumit had burst out laughing. "A big mistake in giving me a new suitcase? Really Grandma, why are you so worried! I promise I won't spoil it! It's supposed to be pretty tough, anyway."

"It isn't the ... well, take care of it," grandma had mumbled.

Rata-tat-tat! Rat-a-tat! Sumit's thoughts were shattered once again by a loud knock on the door. It was the TC. Sumit fumbled in his pockets trying to find the ticket he had shoved

in carelessly. Surely he hadn't lost it! That would be too humiliating for words! On his first journey too!

"Are you travelling alone?" asked the TC.

"Yes," replied Sumit looking frantically for the all-important slip of paper. Oh here it was in the other pocket! He handed it over with a smile of relief. The TC nodded and gave it back to him. Sumit settled down in his corner, his thoughts racing back to the summer holidays once again ...

He had spent an exciting week with his father at Nainital – boating and going for long walks. It had often seemed to Sumit that his father was on the verge of telling him something important. But he never did. On their way back his father suddenly looked up from the wheel and said, "Sumit, how would you like to spend the rest of your holidays with your mother?"

"My mother!" he had cried, taken aback. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," he replied somewhat casually. "She lives nearby. Teaches in a school."

He had felt all churned up inside. As though he was being choked. "You never told me before that I had a mother!" he had cried accusingly. "I ... I ... don't think I want to meet her! I wouldn't know what to say!"

"I'm not worried about that!" said his father. "You always have enough to say! However, you needn't stay unless you want to. We'll just drop in for an hour, say hello to her and push off!"

"But Papa, she's your wife ... you can't ... "

"She is no longer my wife. We were divorced long ago. But she is your mother. I thought you should meet her now that you're a teenager. Thirteen-going-on-fourteen aren't you?"

"But Papa ... why ... why ...?"

"Shhh," said his father. "We are almost there. That's the gate, I think. Hop out and open it."

Almost mechanically Sumit had jumped out of the car and opened the gate and jumped in after he had shut it behind him. And they came to a halt in front of a tiny bungalow. Someone stood on the balcony. Waiting for them? Yes, it was his mother. It seemed as though the photograph in his room had suddenly come alive – with a few added touches of grey.

"Here we are, Sushmita," said his father stepping down. "This is Sumit. Recognize him?"

Sumit stood still, his fists clenched tightly. He WOULDN'T rush towards her, crying out "Ma" as the long-lost boy inevitably did in Hindi films and TV serials! But would she? Cry all over him and go soppy? His eyes met hers. Her voice was perfectly calm and natural as she said, "Why, Sumit, what a big boy you've grown to be!" No tears! No fuss! No long speeches, thank goodness!

"You're giving us tea, I hope?" said Papa. "I'm dying of thirst."

"The kettle's boiling," said his mother, smiling. "Come in. Sumit, this is Raja, my dog."

Raja was all over him – barking, licking and wagging his tail! Sumit was delighted. It was Raja who broke the ice.

"You'll stay here for a while, I hope," said his mother laughing. "Even if it's for Raja's sake."

"Yes, I will, Mama," said Sumit the long unused address springing to his lips instinctively.

"Hey you! Can I have your comics?" Sumit started.

The girl was smiling at him. "You've been hanging on to them like grim death all this time ... and you're not even reading them!"

Sumit handed them back.

"Mind if I come over to your side?" said the girl. "I'm bored with nothing to do except watching the sunset ... It's lovely but I can't keep on staring at it like you!"

He couldn't help laughing at her frankness. She was just like some of the girls in his class who wanted to talk all the time. "Were you making up poetry by any chance?" she asked. "You looked so solemn and faraway and ..."

"No fears! I can't write poetry to save my life!" They were soon chatting away merrily, discussing school, books, music and friends. Rita was a year his senior but that didn't make any difference.

"Is anyone coming to meet you at the station?" Rita asked suddenly. "We could drop you ..."

"I'm sure my father will be there at the station," Sumit said.

"Who was the lady who came to see you off?" asked Rita curiously. "Your aunt?"

"No," said Sumit, stumbling and choking over his words. "It was my mother."

"Your mother? Why did she stay back then?"

"She teaches in a school there."

"Oh really? And comes over for the holidays, I suppose? I've an aunt who does that."

Sumit's voice shook as he answered. "She never comes to Calcutta at all."

Would there be a stream of questions now? Ones he would not be able to answer? Questions that would fill him

with resentment, anger, embarrassment and humiliation? Was it foolish to have blurted out the truth like that? A moment passed! Or was it more? Then Rita said in a perfectly natural voice – "Are your parents separated?"

Sumit nodded silently, hoping fervently that she wouldn't ask him why or how it happened. Did he know the answer himself?

Yes, he did! An answer of sorts ... however vague! It was only last evening. He had been out for a walk with his mother and Raja. He had thrown his ball to Raja and was running after him when he suddenly stumbled against a stone and fell down heavily. For a moment everything went dark.

Then suddenly, he felt his mother's arms round him and a voice tense with worry cried out, "Are you hurt, darling?"

Sumit had replied, "No, Mama," resting his head against her shoulder for a brief moment. Then he straightened himself and stood up. "Why ... Mama? Why did you?" he had whispered, quite out of the blue. He had no expectation of her understanding what he really wanted to ask. But she did.

For a while they just walked in silence. Then she said, "You mean, why your father and I separated?"

"Yes," Sumit whispered.

He had seen any number of films and TV serials about broken homes. But in those, almost inevitably, one of the parents happened to be a villain – either drunken or ruthlessly ambitious, selfish, callous or an immoral character. But neither of his parents were like that. What could be the possible explanation?

"Do you remember how you adored gulabjamuns as a child?" his mother asked abruptly.

"What has that got to do with it?" asked Sumit brushing away the question impatiently. He didn't wish to be side-tracked into childish explanations! "Now I don't like sweets at all, especially gulabjamuns!"

"Yes, I remember you telling me that," said his mother. "It's just an example to show you that a person's taste may change with years. People themselves change. Not necessarily, of course. Nor always. But it is possible. When it happens and two people cannot see eye to eye any more, they may decide to live apart rather than live together and argue about things day in and day out. But they need not necessarily become enemies. That's how your father and I felt!"

"But what about how I'd feel, Mama?" cried Sumit. "Didn't you think of me at all?"

"It wasn't an easy decision," said his mother slowly. "I couldn't have done it if Grandma hadn't been there to look after you."

That had been all. They never discussed the subject again. But now, with Rita's curious eyes on him, the old ache smarted as never before. He winced as she asked, "Are you upset about it?"

"Naturally! I don't like being different from others – others who have a normal home."

He didn't mean to say it! Not to a perfect stranger like Rita! But he had to speak to someone. It all came out in a rush before he could stop himself. "I can't think what my friends would say if they hear about it." Would they laugh at him? Rag him, tease him and say cruel, unkind things?

Or worse still, would they whisper about him the way they did about Sonu, whose mother had married someone else? He shuddered at the idea.

"But why on earth should they say anything?" asked Rita. "It's none of their business! Why should you care? I didn't think boys could be so touchy!"

"We too have feelings, you know!"

"Yes, but you can't have everything the way you want it! You have to make the most of things."

"It's easy to talk!" said Sumit in a bitter voice. "How would you feel if it were you?"

"I'd be jolly happy and thankful to have a mother at all – even if she lived somewhere else. Mine died when I was three. You are luckier than many children!"

Suddenly Sumit thought of his mother. The peaceful cottage where he had spent the most tranquil and different holiday of his life. His moments of quiet companionship when his mother and he had gone out picking wild flowers, Raja at their heels. Those moments when he had sat in the moonlit porch, listening to her playing the guitar softly. The time he had helped rearrange her study and her books, hundreds of them. When the two of them had stood by the open window at night watching the millions of fireflies glowing under the champa hedge. When they had listened to the drip, drip of the falling rain in silence, followed by the croaking frogs. Yes, he was indeed lucky to have a mother – even if she didn't belong to his everyday world.

Sumit's face lit up in a smile. "I'll tell you about Raja, my mother's dog," he said.

"Oh, does she have a dog?" cried Rita. "I have two. They're called Coca and Cola." Soon they were jabbering

away about the antics of Raja, Coca and Cola. "You two have been talking nineteen to the dozen all this time," said Rita's father looking up from his paper. "I'd better go and order dinner for the three of us."

"I have some food. We could share it," said Sumit happily.

He looked out of the window. The full moon was racing along with them, shedding a silvery glow on the trees and open fields. Suddenly he remembered his mother's parting words: "Sumit dear, never be afraid of looking truth squarely in the face!" Well, he would not be afraid any more! He'd face it, make the most of it and come to terms with it! Perhaps that's what "growing up" really meant!

The Tough Decision

Deepa Agarwal
Illustrated by Vandana J Bist

The mild winter sunshine warmed the playground pleasantly. It was break time and girls were scattered all over – running around, practising shots on the basketball court, or just sitting and munching their tiffins.

A bunch of girls hung around near the big, open air stage, the pride of the school. They were listening intently to a wavy haired girl, standing in the centre of the group.

"I'll be wearing a white dress you know, made of net, with silver spangles all over –"

"Wow!"

"And," she continued, fluttering her eyelashes, "There'll be a silver crown in my hair."

A murmur of admiration rose from the group. The girl, whose name was Sunaina, smiled smugly.

But a less flattering remark suddenly came from elsewhere.

"Chchee!" said a round faced girl with short, boyishly cropped hair. "What a show off!"

"Niloo!" said a small and mousy-looking girl standing

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beside her. "Whatever is the matter? That wasn't like you at all!"

"Nothing at all," replied Niloo, looking disgusted. "I'm getting fed up of airs."

Niloo and Richa were often called the "inseparables." People wondered at their friendship, the two were so different. Bold and outspoken Niloo who never minced her words, and quiet, reserved Richa who hardly spoke at all.

Sunaina flashed them an unpleasant look. She hadn't heard the remark, but she guessed Niloo wasn't saying anything nice about her. Her expression made it obvious. The two were longstanding rivals.

The bell rang and the playground emptied rapidly. Only the group by the stage remained. They were waiting to rehearse the play.

Soon Mrs Puri came bustling along. She was the elocution teacher and a talented dramatics coach. She was tall, with a pleasant, open face, and the students loved her direct and informal manner.

"Well, girls," she said briskly, "I can see that you're eager to begin." She paused, flashing them a broad smile. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a delightful play – though we're only doing certain scenes. And I'm sure you can do justice to Shakespeare – now that you're a year older."

"Oh ma'am," Sunaina piped up, a syrupy smile on her face, "We're just dying to begin!"

"Good," Mrs Puri said, unmoved by her flattering tone. "You've all been given your parts, so shall we start reading? By the way, we're lucky to have two excellent roles for two of our outstanding actresses. Titania is just the right part

for Sunaina and I'm sure Niloo will be perfect as Bottom – with her flair for comedy. And yes, Seema you're nice and tall. I think the role of Oberon will suit you."

The girls jumped onto the stage and the rehearsal began in real earnest.

This was the first time Richa was taking part in a play. It was a small role – she was Peaseblossom, one of the fairies attending on Titania. Still she was thrilled about it. But when her turn came, she felt just like a block of wood.

But Mrs Puri smiled encouragingly. "Don't worry, Richa," she said. "You'll be surprised at yourself when the real day arrives."

Richa smiled back shyly. It was so different from what she'd expected! She thought of the video recording of the play Mrs Puri had shown them before they began – by a famous theatre group. How scintillating it had been!

Right now, even accomplished actresses like Sunaina and Niloo didn't seem able to put any life into their parts.

"Come on, Titania, show some affection," Mrs Puri called out. "You're supposed to be in love!"

"She'd have to be a really good actress to do that," Niloo muttered under her breath.

Sunaina's smile grew fixed but she pretended she hadn't heard. Luckily the period ended just then.

"All right girls," Mrs Puri said. "Run along. I want you all to memorize your parts. No books after the third rehearsal – remember that!"

Chattering excitedly, the girls hurried to the next class. Sunaina, as usual, was surrounded by her "chamchis" as Niloo called them.

"Oh Niloo," Richa said. "Why did you say that? You

know Sunaina. She'll say you're jealous."

"Why should I be jealous?" Niloo retorted. "I'm a better actress than she is. Even though she always manages to steal the prize!"

"Niloo!" Richa said, troubled. "Why do you let her get to you? I've never heard you pass such nasty remarks before."

Richa had known Niloo a long time but she had never seen this vindictive streak before.

"Anyway," she continued. "You have a terrific role. You're sure to win this time."

"I'm not so sure," Niloo said, "Though it's tailor-made for me." Her face clouded over.

The next rehearsal was the very next day. Already, Richa could sense a slight change. The girls were beginning to get a feel for their parts, though they still had a long way to go.

"*... and thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me*
On the first view, to say, to swear, I love thee."

Sunaina sounded more convincing now.

"*Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that ...*," said Bottom in a matter-of-fact way.

"She certainly doesn't," one of the chamchis nudged another and giggled. "Isn't it funny," she whispered, "Sunaina having to pretend to be crazy about Niloo!"

The chamchis came with Sunaina to rehearsals, though they weren't in the play.

"Yah," smirked the other. "But what fantastic acting! I can't wait to see her in her costume."

Waiting for her cue, Richa overheard them. Personally she thought Sunaina didn't have to act. She was just being

herself as Titania – vain, wilful and spiteful.

The chamchis clapped loudly as Sunaina delivered her next dialogue and she gave them an encouraging smile. But Niloo frowned. They were really getting on her nerves.

"It's just too sickening," she said later. "They only clap for Sunaina. As if the rest of us can't act!"

"Don't worry, Niloo," Richa reassured her. "You're doing a wonderful job. That funny expression of yours – I almost burst out laughing on the stage. Just ignore those silly chamchis."

But Niloo just couldn't ignore them. She stuck out the next rehearsal as well as she could, then decided to take action.

"I can't stand it any longer," she told Richa. "I'm going to complain to Mrs Puri."

And complain she did – immediately.

"Hmmh," Mrs Puri nodded thoughtfully. "I'm not too happy about those girls being there in the audience while you practise. But since nobody seemed to mind I didn't say anything."

So when Sunaina sailed in with her entourage the next day, she got a big shock.

"Only people acting in this play will remain, please," Mrs Puri said crisply. "No audience for the rehearsals. It disturbs everyone."

The chamchis silently filed out, looking sulky. Sunaina's face flamed with anger. She cast a venomous glance at Niloo, as though she could guess who was behind it.

"Thanks, ma'am," the other girls said, pleased.

"They were a nuisance. We don't want an audience till we're perfect."

Sunaina went almost purple. But she controlled herself with an effort and put on an ingratiating smile. "I'm so sorry, ma'am," she said. "My silly friends insisted on coming and watching me act. As though I wanted an audience!"

This was their first rehearsal without using their book and it went perfectly. Now that they had memorized the lines for the parts they were playing, their delivery sounded more natural. Also, they could move about and gesture more freely. Richa felt that the fact that the chamchis were not there made a big difference too!

At the end of the rehearsal, Mrs Puri announced, "Girls, I'm thinking of entering the play in the Inter-school Drama Competition. It's shaping up so well, I feel you stand a good chance."

"Terrific!" "Great!" "Fantastic!" was the enthusiastic response.

They rehearsed with renewed zeal the next day. Richa could feel the play taking shape before her eyes. Of course there were lapses still. People forgot their lines, occasionally missed their cues. But Mrs Puri was quite happy with the way it was going, and so were the girls.

"Have you heard the latest?" one of Sunaina's chamchis said. "About Mrs Puri? Yeah, I've heard she's gone on leave for some time," another replied. "Who will direct the play now?" a third chamchi turned around to ask. The question was left hanging because the teacher came in at that very moment.

Richa's heart sank. "I hope it's not true!" she thought. Then Sunaina got up and presented some lovely

gladioli to Mrs Kumar, their young English teacher who was new to school.

"From my garden, ma'am," she said.

"How pretty, thank you," Mrs Kumar replied.

An uneasy suspicion formed in Richa's mind. Was Mrs Kumar going to fill in for Mrs Puri? Surely it didn't seem likely that Sunaina could have known that.

But later, as she brushed past Sunaina and her chamchis in the corridor, she overheard something which made her even more uneasy.

"I've got the silly fool wrapped round my finger," Sunaina was telling her gang complacently. The others shook hands gleefully.

And sure enough Mrs Puri did not turn up for rehearsal. Mrs Kumar came instead.

"Mrs Puri has gone on leave, girls," she said. "She's quite ill and will be away for some time. I'll take over while she's away."

The girls' faces fell at once. They were really sorry to hear that Mrs Puri was ill. But they were sorry for themselves, too. They had come to depend on her so much that they felt lost without her.

"Never mind, girls," said Seema, the tall girl who was playing Oberon. "We must carry on like before. Mrs Kumar is here to help us. Will Mrs Puri be back before the competition?"

"I think so," Mrs Kumar said.

Glumly they began to position themselves on the stage. It was only then that Niloo realized that the chamchis were back in full force.

"But ma'am," she burst out, pointing to them, "These

girls are not supposed to be here!"

"Why not?" Sunaina asked agressively. "I think," she said, turning to Mrs Kumar with a winning smile, "It'll be very helpful. This way we'll be able to know the audience reaction."

Mrs Kumar hesitated. She was a new teacher and a bit unsure of herself. Also, Sunaina had managed to make a good impression on her, while Niloo's brusque tone annoyed her.

"Let them stay," she said finally. "We'll try it out for a few days."

The chamchis behaved perfectly for a couple of days. They clapped politely for everyone, laughed and were silent when required.

But then they went back to their old ways. They yawned loudly when Niloo delivered her lines and looked obviously bored at her antics. One day they even walked out pointedly as she was performing. Niloo tried valiantly to tolerate it – she really had no choice. Then one day, they overdid themselves.

It was the scene when Titania comes back to her senses and realizes she had been in love with an ass.

"*My Oberon! What vision have I seen!/Methought I was enamour'd of an ass*," Sunaina said with feeling.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed the chamchis. "She's absolutely right," one of them whispered loudly.

"An ass! Doesn't the role suit her!" said another.

Niloo was furious! It was utterly humiliating.

"I've had it!" she said afterwards to Richa. "I'm not attending any more rehearsals!"

"You mustn't do that!" Richa said, utterly dismayed. "There's only a week left for the show. Besides, you'll

be playing right into Sunaina's hands. Don't you see? She wants you out."

Niloo paused to think. She knew Richa was right. But her mouth set in stubborn lines, making Richa uneasy. She could see Niloo would not let Sunaina get away with it.

Then, after the dress rehearsal, Niloo dropped her bomb.

It had been a wildly chaotic affair. People had muffed their lines, missed their cues, one of the fairy's wings had fallen off, reducing her to tears. Niloo's acting had been mechanical and uninspired.

But, as they gloomily trooped out a voice from the back said, "That was awful, wasn't it?"

"Mrs Puri!" They rushed to surround her, suddenly lighthearted again. "Welcome back ma'am!"

"Never mind girls," she tried to cheer them up, "A bad dress rehearsal generally means a good final performance!"

Later, in the greenroom, Niloo absentmindedly removed her makeup. Sunaina, gorgeous in her costume was holding court in one corner. At once something clicked in Niloo's mind, bringing a broad smile to her face after several days.

When she told Richa she was horrified.

"Niloo, you can't be serious," she said, aghast. "It'll – it'll be a disaster!"

"Who says I can't? I am serious and I will do it!" Niloo replied stubbornly.

"But the play – the school play will be ruined! We'll lose the prize!"

"Don't you dare talk to me about prizes," Niloo said, walking off in a huff.

But Richa could not help brooding over Niloo's outrageous plan. It was a simple one. Niloo happened to have two brothers addicted to practical jokes, and Sunaina happened to be terrified of lizards. Niloo planned to drop a plastic lizard – which looked wonderfully real – on her lap during the course of the play.

"She'll really make a fool of herself," Niloo had said exultantly, "Screaming and jumping about in that white dress that she bragged about!"

"What should I do?" thought Richa, almost frantic. There was no time even to think – the play was the very next day. She could hardly warn Sunaina or tell Mrs Puri. She would be betraying Niloo. It would mean the end of their friendship – and that was too awful to even think about. But neither was it possible to make Niloo see reason.

One thing, however was quite clear in her mind. Niloo had to be stopped.

Then the day came and there they were in the greenroom struggling into their costumes and applying makeup. Squeals and cries came from every corner. "Hey, this doesn't fit!" "Pass me a pin, please ... CAN someone pass me a pin!" "Gosh, don't I look a perfect clown!" And so on.

And Niloo was her jolly old self again laughing and joking even with Sunaina, who looked absolutely stumped at this change. Richa was tense – it was her first stage appearance – and then – she still did not know how to obstruct Niloo's plan.

But just before the play began the solution came to

her. Suddenly, she knew what she had to do. It was a tough decision to make. She had never opposed Niloo so openly before. But she knew she had to do it.

The stage really looked like a fairyland. Trees and plants had been placed here and there to transform it into a wonderfully realistic forest. Softly glowing lights gave an impression of moonlight.

Right from the start, the play was a success. The long hours of rehearsal paid off now and each and everyone excelled in their parts. But Niloo as Bottom easily stole the show. Her buffoonery had everyone rolling with laughter.

Richa kept an anxious eye on her.

Then the scene came when Bottom reposed on Titania's lap, with the fairies flitting around them. Richa caught Niloo's quick movement. Before she could direct Sunaina's attention to the thing on her lap, Richa darted forward and grabbed it. Sunaina was startled, but Niloo looked furious. However, being good actresses they quickly recovered and went on. Nobody even noticed what had happened.

"What do you think you were trying to do?" Sunaina said angrily when the scene ended. "Trying to throw me off? Jealous cat!"

Richa bit her lip and kept quiet. If Sunaina only knew what a narrow escape she'd had!

But the look Niloo gave her was really disturbing. As if to say, "I'll settle scores with you later."

Then the play was over, to deafening applause. Theirs had been the last item. Quickly, Richa slipped out of her costume. Then, as she turned to go, she came face to face with Niloo.

"What did you do that for?" she asked harshly. "You stupid fool!"

"I did what I felt I had to," said Richa quietly. "You were making a big mistake, Niloo. Letting all of us down. Yourself too. It would have been terrible."

"Not me!" Niloo said angrily. "You ruined my plan. I thought you were my friend!"

"Don't tell me the bosom pals are fighting," said someone. It was Mrs Puri.

"Oh, no ma'am," Richa turned red with embarrassment.

"You all were wonderful, girls," Mrs Puri said, smiling. "I'm proud of you all."

"Thanks, ma'am," they said, mechanically.

For a moment they stood there in awkward silence. Then, "Come on, Niloo," Richa said. "My father must have come. We're going home together, remember?"

"Wait a minute," said Mrs Puri. "You're not to leave as yet. Wait for the judges' decision."

Seeing them hesitate, she said, "I insist. Your father won't mind waiting a while."

Somewhat reluctantly, they went down into the hall, packed with noisy schoolchildren. Frowning sulkily, Niloo refused to even look at Richa.

As the judges got up to announce their decision an expectant hush fell over the hall.

"The prize for the best play goes to ... *A Midsummer Night's Dream!*"

At once they were on their feet, shouting and clapping. Niloo turned to Richa, her face softening – then breaking into a big grin as she cried, "We did it! We won!"

In their excitement they barely heard the other prizes

being announced, till Richa's ears caught something.

"Listen!" she cried, clutching Niloo's arm. "They're saying something. Your name – Niloo, you've won the Best Actress prize!"

Niloo looked stunned and unbelieving as her schoolmates turned around excitedly to congratulate her. "At last," she said softly, squeezing Richa's hand. "Thanks to you!"

The Young Writer!

Akshay Singh
Art by Subba Ghosh

Mad, mad, mad. He was going mad. He'd tried everything. Put on some music, put off the music, paced the small room, stared endlessly into and through the ceiling, made coffee, washed up ... and got nothing! "Why, why," he raved before the mirror, "Why in heaven's name did I take up writing as my profession? I should have become a simple shoeshine boy. I would have been happy. Instead, this – endless hours of chasing words on paper. God!!" He kicked the wastepaper basket and spilled all his frustrated attempts on the floor. With a scowl, he put on his jacket and shouted to his sister, "I'm going for a walk. Don't know when I'll be back."

Outside he felt free from the congestion of his room. The weather was just perfect, he thought. Dark and gloomy, just like his mood. Shoving his hands into his pockets and head down, he started briskly. Where he was headed to, he didn't know. He just knew he had to walk and walk until ... until, well, until something happened.

His sister entered his room with a smile. Her name was

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Priya and she loved this brother of hers even though sometimes his mad outbursts would almost drive her out of her mind. The room was as she had expected it to be. In one word – chaos! The position of the lamp was changed, cassettes were strewn on the desk, a couple of books lay forlorn on the mess that was a bed, coffee mugs and, of course, the inevitable sheets of paper. He said he couldn't think freely if he used a typewriter. The truth was he couldn't type and had never got down to learning. She let everything remain as it was except to pick up the mugs. He always said, when she would comment on the mess his room was in, that it was *his* mess and he would be extremely grateful if she didn't mess around with his mess. Tidiness was something alien to him. He was uncomfortable in it. Even his hair was forever rumpled and wild, as though there were ideas shooting off in various directions. Priya looked at the clock. It was five fifteen pm. Judging from the state of the mess in the room and the littered papers around, Priya surmised that her brother would be back by eight. She had seen him attacking the paper for the last two days and she knew this one was not one of his regular walks. She hoped that she would find him writing silently, as though he was immersed in some other world, when he came back. That would mean that the walk had done him good.

"Moravia." (Was he talking to the path?) "He's a real writer. Clean, crisp with ideas and an imagination that shines in his words. How beautifully his stories seem to flow, like a stream and yet they have a specific direction, they're not just tumbling on blindly. And even Collette. Her stories seem to pluck at the heart. Why can't I write like that?

Why can't I have that art they possess? And Morton ... what perfect simplicity! God – why can't I have my ideas and thoughts put down the way they put down theirs?! Why did I have to go to school and learn how to write even?!"

A pathway led away from the road and following it he came across some sort of a garden. It was a pleasant, quiet place and since there was no one else around he decided to sit down. There was a raised brick platform in the centre and he sat down on the grass with his back against it. And so the time passed as he sat there, but still that feeling of suffocation just wouldn't leave him. He was feeling angry and desolate. Some time went by and he was so absorbed in his thoughts that he didn't notice the man who had come up to him. Startled by the man's voice, he almost jumped out of his skin. He eyed the man suspiciously before answering his greeting. The man was quite elderly and though his clothes weren't much to talk about he carried them well and he had a friendly smile on his face.

"Hallo," the man said. "Do you come here often? This is the first time I'm seeing you. Isn't it a lovely place?"

"Why me?"our young writer thought. Putting a coolness into his voice, he replied that no, he didn't come here often.

"I really love this place. All these trees and bushes and flowers ... they're lovely. Makes one feel so nice. Very peaceful." Saying this he settled down with a sigh next to the boy. "Oh god, no! It's one of those old men who just love to talk," the boy thought, but since he didn't want to be rude, he sat where he was and maintained a stony silence. The old man kept up his small talk, asking questions to which he got abrupt answers. After some time he too lapsed

into silence and they sat there together, one old man and one young, with their backs leaning against the brick platform and a silence hanging between them.

It was after quite some time had passed like this that the old man spoke. "Something is troubling you, but whatever it may be, don't let it trouble you so much that you cannot see the beauty around you." He got up and walked forward to some flowers. "See these flowers." The boy noticed them for the first time. "Whenever I come here, I'm always amazed by them. They're wild flowers. No one takes care of them. And they're different flowers. But still, see how beautiful they are. Each one has its own beauty, its own special quality. What different shapes and sizes they come in! Each one is different and each one seems to be saying "This is me, this is what I am and I am proud of it." That's what I really love about them. They're all so beautiful because they aren't ashamed of what they are. Their beauty is in being themselves ..."

The old man continued talking but his words were then lost to our writer. He looked at the old man and then again at the flowers. "Of course," he thought, "They are all so very beautiful."

At seven fifty pm his sister found him at his desk, silently scribbling on his sheets of paper.

Dear Mr Franks

Vandana J Bist

Illustrated by Manjula Padmanabhan

I met Mr Franks at Susie's birthday party. "See that gentleman over there, blowing up balloons," Susie had told me, "He's old Frankie, my grandpa's closest friend – lives in the Home for the Aged. He must be eighty at least!"

I took a great liking to Mr Franks the moment I started talking to him. He had zest and enthusiasm for life, despite his failing health – and the most interesting stories to tell. His anecdotes kept us laughing and amused throughout the evening.

As I rose to get back to my school hostel he said, "Why don't you come and see me at the Home sometime? Though of course you might think it boring to sit and chat with an old man like me!" I assured him that I did not think so, and that I would surely come with Susie to the Home to meet him.

From then on I met Mr Franks every Wednesday. Wednesday was my day off from the school hostel. I would spend the morning at Susie's and after lunch, I'd walk down to the Home, sometimes with Susie and sometimes on my

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own. He would be relaxing in his tiny doll's home garden, his lanky frame curled up in a cane chair and soaking in the warm winter sunshine. Susie and I would troop in, chattering shrilly like a couple of magpies.

"Ah! Come in, ladies!" Mr Franks would straighten up and ask us to sit down. "Do mind that flower bed! I've just planted the sweet peas!" That he had been an expert gardener in his younger days was no empty boast. He had a beautifully kept garden and a large number of certificates to prove it. Some of the certificates had been framed and they now hung on his veranda walls, yellow and dusty with age.

Mr Franks had served in the army, and somehow most of his anecdotes were a hilarious mixture of botanical and military life. "You know, young ladies," he told us one day, "Misunderstandings can be quite embarrassing sometimes! Once when I was away on leave, our unit mess got the electricity connection they had been wanting for quite some time. Now I was obviously in the dark about the latest development. When I came back, the colonel called me and asked me to get new bulbs put in the entire mess. I informed him that I had already put in the bulbs, and could not now put in new ones. He was extremely angry at me for disobeying orders and we continued arguing. It was only much later that we realized that he was talking of the electric bulbs and I of the lilies!"

Most times that I went to visit Mr Franks I took something for his garden – a packet of seeds or a couple of small terracotta pots. Or it would be a bougainvillea cutting of a colour which he didn't already have.

"Thank you, my dear," he would say, "It's nice to know

that you're interested in the plant world as well!" Then together we'd plant the seeds or put saplings in the pots. "You know, child," Mr Franks would tell me as we worked, "Plants too have feelings. And they grow better if you treat them like friends!" He would point to a healthy and robust fern growing in one corner – "See that young man there? I talk to him every day and he's always happy to see me!" Then I would dust my hands and glance at my watch. "Yes! Yes! It's time for you to go! Shall I see you again next week?" I would nod my head and hurry back to school.

Mr Franks waited for Wednesday as much as I did. One day I fell ill. Viral fever had been raging in the school and I was taken to the infirmary with high temperature. Lying in bed, I realized it had been almost two weeks since I had seen Mr Franks. He must be wondering what had happened. Just then the nurse walked in. "Someone to see you, miss!" Behind her ambled in old Mr Franks. I was delighted to see him.

"So the bug got you too! How do you feel now, lady?" he said, handing me a bunch of dahlias. I said I was feeling much better now.

"Thought something must have gone wrong, so I asked Susie and came along to see you. These flowers are from my garden."

I thanked him for the flowers and for coming to see me. "Oh, not at all! Now get well soon, and then we can prune the roses together."

Other than gardening, Mr Franks had a great liking for one more thing. That was festivals. "I think this county has lovely festivals!" he would say. He looked forward to Diwali and Dussehra as much as he did to Christmas, and would

get as much joy and delight from lighting candles at Diwali as he would from decorating the small Christmas tree with streamers and little stars.

Before going home to Gorakhpur in December, I would take for Mr Franks a small box of decorations for his Christmas tree, bought from some pocket money I had saved. "Thank you, my dear," he would say. "I'll leave them on the tree till you come back!" I'd wish him a merry Christmas and ask him to take care. "I will, my child, and come back soon!"

And so two years passed since I had met Mr Franks. Then one day, just before school was to break up for the winter vacations, I got a letter from Daddy. He had been transferred to Delhi, and I was to complete my last two years of school there. He would be coming to Lucknow the following week to complete formalities at my school and to take me home.

I was very sad when I read Daddy's letter. I thought of my school and my friends and knew I would feel terrible leaving them.

The following Wednesday, when I went to see Mr Franks, he was weeding the flower beds. He looked at me as I walked in forlornly. "What's the matter, young lady? Do I see a black cloud hovering on your head?" I nodded and handed him Daddy's letter. He read the letter through and then looked at me. My eyes were full of tears. "Now! Now!" he said, sitting down next to me on the stone steps. "You'll meet new people, make new friends! Is that something to cry about!" I shook my head and said that I would miss my friends here and I would miss him too. "I will miss you too!" he said, holding my hand in his large

wrinkled one. "But we will continue our friendship with letters! You must write to me often!"

Of course I would I told him.

"That's my friend!" he said, patting my shoulder. "Now come on, let's share a cup of coffee before you leave."

We sat together in the garden, quietly sipping our coffee. The butterflies flitted and danced among the colourful array of flowers. Then one butterfly swooped down and perched itself daintily on old Mr Franks' knee. He watched it quietly as it opened and closed its wings. Then it flew off and resumed its dance among the flowers.

"You know," said Mr Franks, "Agatha, my wife, had a very charming belief. She would say that if ever a butterfly came and sat on you, a friend far away had remembered you and sent you his love!"

The sun was beginning to set. I got up to go for I had to reach school before dark. We walked down quietly together to the big iron gate of the Home.

."Well, dear," said Mr Franks, as we reached the end of the path, "Do write to me soon and tell me all about your new school!" I held Mr Franks' hands for a moment. My eyes filled with tears again. I said goodbye and walked away hurriedly. Then for a moment I stopped and looked back. Old Mr Franks was still waving to me through the gate.

I came away to Delhi. Everything seemed strange and new. New friends. New teachers. I missed my school back in Lucknow, and everybody there. But most of all, I missed Mr Franks. Both Susie and Mr Franks wrote to me often. Mr Franks' letters were amusing and always contained some news of his garden and his plants. I would write to him regularly.

My school in Delhi had beautifully kept gardens and whenever I sat near the flowers I remembered Mr Franks.

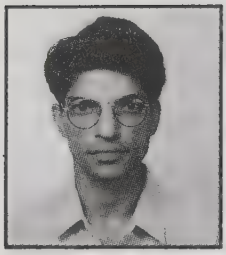
Then one day Mr Franks stopped writing. I did not receive any letter from him for a long time. Almost two months later, I got a letter from Susie. "My dear Aditi," she had written, "I feel terribly sad telling you that old Frankie passed away last Saturday. He had been quite ill for the past three weeks. He was remembering you a lot and he has left you two of his favourite ferns. I shall bring them with me when I come to Delhi next."

I read the rest of the letter through a blur of tears.

For the next few days, I could think only about Mr Franks and the Wednesday afternoons we had spent together.

Almost a week had passed since I had got Susie's letter. It was Friday and I had a Geography test that afternoon. I sat revising my lesson under the gulmohar tree. The chrysanthemums and dahlias were in full bloom, and butterflies darted and pirouetted among them. Then suddenly, a little yellow butterfly hovered around me and finally perched lightly on my leg stretched out in front of me. I became absolutely still. It moved its wings daintily for a moment and then flew off to join its friends once again. My heart was filled with joy. As I watched the butterflies dancing among the flowers, I knew that somewhere far, far away, old Mr Franks had remembered me and sent me his love.

Biographical Notes



Akshay Singh started as an advertising copywriter. Some of his best writing – stories and features – happened after he joined *Target* in 1988. He went on to work with an NGO, setting up a non-formal school in Delhi. He currently teaches in a school in Mumbai.

B R Bhagwat was born at the turn of this century into a reformist family. An active freedom fighter, he joined the underground movement, was arrested in 1943 and imprisoned for twenty two months. He has been editor of the children's magazines *Khelgadi* and *Balmitra.* The much-loved Faster Fenay, a boy who solved mysteries with brawn and brain, as well as Bipin Bukalwar, are his creations. He has two hundred books to his credit besides translations of twenty books by Jules Verne and other novels. He is the recipient of several awards including a Lifetime Achievement in Children's Literature by the USA based Maharashtra Foundation.

Deepa Agarwal, whose first story appeared in *Target* some fourteen years ago, has about twenty five published books to her credit. These include picture books, short story collections, ghost stories, retold myths, folk tales, mystery and adventure novels and biography. Among others, she has received the NCERT Award for Children's Literature. She also writes for adults and translates from Hindi to English.

Geeta Dharmarajan is a creative writer and a professional editor. She has done courses in Education from the University of Pennsylvania. She has served as Assistant Editor, *Target*, and *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the alumni magazine for the University of Pennsylvania. She was Head of the Women's Voluntary Services of the Nilgiris and has been the Director (Education) of INTACH, Tamil Nadu. She is the founder of Katha, an NGO working in the areas of literacy and literature. Currently, she is its Executive Director.

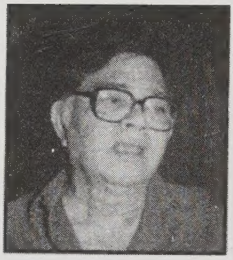
Mala Marwah, a writer-illustrator, created a delightful comic strip for younger children called *Beeta Baiju* for *Target*. She has a Master's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Baroda and has studied painting at the California College of Arts and Crafts. Her published work includes poems, stories for children, and critical essays on Modern Indian Art with special focus on contemporary Indian painting.

Monisha Mukundan is a writer specially interested in children's books and has been one of the editors of *Target* magazine. She is the author of *Shekar, Akbar-Birbal Stories* and several other books for older children. An editor with the award winning magazine *Namaste* since 1982, she lives in Delhi.

Paro Anand, currently an editor with the National Centre for Children's Literature, writes for children on their problems in today's world as well as the environment and wildlife. She encourages reading habits, specially those of underprivileged children. She has received an award from the Russian Centre for Science and Culture for her contribution to children's literature.

Satyajit Ray, a recipient of the Bharat Ratna, followed in the literary footsteps of his renowned father and grandfather. He established the Calcutta Film Society in 1947 while working as a designer and illustrator. His Apu trilogy – *Pather Panchali, Aparajito* and *Apur Sansar* won instant international acclaim. He began writing in the late 1950s and created memorable characters like Feluda and Professor Shanku – one a detective and the other a scientist. In 1961, he revived *Sandesh*, the magazine started by his father Sukumar Ray, probably the first and certainly one of the best-loved writers of nonsense verse and children's books, and contributed extensively to it with stories, poems and illustrations. He died in April 1992.

Sigrun Srivastava is a sculptor by profession. She has published over thirty picture books and children's story books. She has scripted for theatre, television and films, been a member of the Children's Film Society and is the founder member of the Forum of Authors for Children, Teachers and Schools.

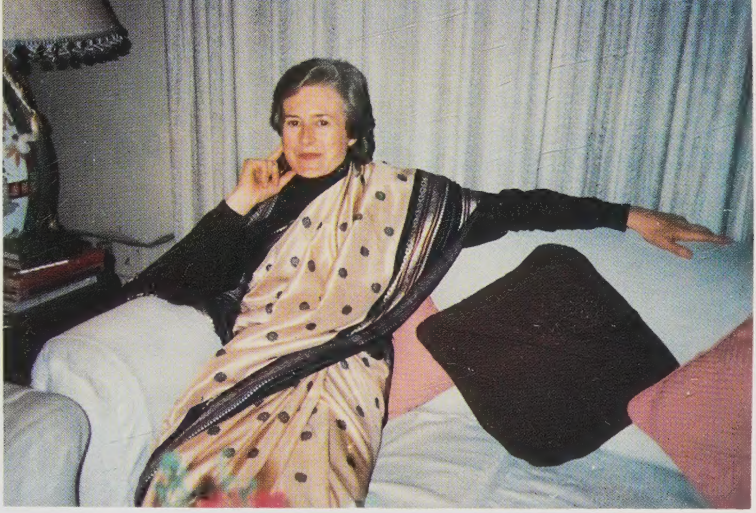


Sunil Gangopadhyay was born in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. He moved to Calcutta after the Partition, took up employment while in his teens and went on to obtain a Masters degree from Calcutta University. He began writing poetry in 1953 and his collections like *Eka Ebang Kayekjan, Amar Swapna, Aami Ki Rakam Bhabe Benche Aachhi* prove him to be one of the most powerful writers of contemporary Bangla literature. His trendsetting *Atma Prakash* is a powerful portrayal of the ennui and frustration of the Calcutta youth. Two of his finest novels are *Sei Samay*, which won the Sahitya Akademi Award, and *Purba Paschim.*

Swapna Dutta, currently one of the editors with the *Limca Book of Records*, has been writing for children for the last two decades in English, Hindi and Bangla in several newspapers and magazines including *Target.* Her *Juneli* series are about the escapades of students in a boarding school. She has published over thirty books including translations from regional languages, short stories, one-act plays and picture books.

Manu Mahadevan has been a travel writer for over fifteen years with most of the leading English newspapers. He has written some enthralling serialized science fiction for *Target.* He is currently working with Tata Infosys in Noida.

Vandana J Bist has a degree in Fine Arts from the Delhi College of Art. Since 1986 she has been working as a freelance writer and illustrator and her work has been published in various children's magazines and books. Her first book, *A Ticket to Home and Other Stories* was published by Harper Collins in 1994. She has won several awards including the Noma Concours, the CBT Short Story Award, the Katha Award for her short story in English and the ChitraKala Award for *A Princesss with the Longest Hair.*



Teacher, journalist, editor ... Rosalind Wilson was all these, and more. A student at Oxford University in the 1970s, her strong bond with her Indian friends propelled her to visit India. And once here, she stayed on, fascinated. She began by teaching at St Thomas School and Springdales, both in Delhi, later switching careers to try her hand at journalism by editing the Press Institute of India's magazine *Vidura*.

Her heart, however, was always with children and when *Target* was launched, she joined as one of the editors. Later, she became its full-time editor, nurturing it with such care and commitment that it became the best-known and best-loved magazine for children.

As editor of *Target*, she took many a fledgling first-time writer under her wing, honing their skills with patience and a very fine, discerning editorial scalpel.Today, everyone who has worked with her, generously acknowledges her immense contribution to making them the writers they are today.

Essentially an outdoors person, she was a hockey player, loved exploring the countryside, trekking in the hills, bird-watching and going for hikes and long cycle rides. Extremely concerned about our environment, she influenced a whole generation of children with her ideas.

Rosalind lost a bravely-fought battle against cancer on July 28, 1992.

Photo courtesy: Jacquelin Singh

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